*Saggistica letteraria*

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Carmen Concilio

# New Critical Patterns in Postcolonial Discourse.

## Historical Traumas and Environmental Issues

Trauben

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*To Elsa Linguanti*

# *Introduction*

'Is there a postcolonial condition?' This is the question asked by the Dutch scholar, Peter Geschiere, and it is a question that has been in the air for years. It is accompanied by similar questions: 'How could so many variants of colonialism produce one postcolonial condition? And how long does the postcolonial really last?' Similarly, I would add, are there so-called postcolonial writers and till when will they remain postcolonial? These questions are rhetorical in nature. The answer is certainly: NO. There is not one single postcolonial condition, but conditions, in the plural. Yet, the postcolonial condition lasts for long, that is a given. Achille Mbembe claims that the postcolony is the present condition of many an African nation nowadays.[1] Amitav Ghosh in turn denounces that, if India and China are experiencing economic and demographic booms that have taken fifty years to articulate themselves and to propel them as new world economic powers, that is a consequence of colonialism, which has blocked and prevented their development for years. Thus, in spite of decolonisation, the postcolonial condition is still part of our contemporary world. Finally, most writers would reject the label 'postcolonial author', for that is not a status, at all.

'Postcolonial' is rather a frame of mind, a specific form of

[1] A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2001; E. Boehmer, S. Morton (eds.), *Terror and the Postcolonial: A Concise Companion,* Oxford, Blackwell, 2009.

theoretical and, hopefully, practical criticism that first of all always questions the relative positioning, and possible asymmetry in terms of power, of the speaker, critic, and writer. Postcolonial discourse and criticism primarily examine hierarchical violent relations trying to dismantle the shared prejudices, the cultural constructs and psychological fears that had helped creating those power relations.

Peter Geschiere, like a new Paul on the way to Damascus, stresses that postcolonial thinking is a way of thinking, a philosophy, which undermines Eurocentric history. What appears as the sudden illumination of a postcolonial critic hides, in fact, the very self-conscious concern of a historian about 'the constant stretching of the notion and its increasing popularity, which leads to glib usages of the term (cf. the current debate in France that seems to come all too late), serves to conceal important variations'.[2]

What is interesting, however, is the fact that this debate, although not totally new, takes place on the platform of an on-line Journal, titled *The Johannesburg Salon*, edited by Sara Allen and Achille Mbembe, which is part of a wider, new and very original project. The project consists of four moments. First, a proper academic workshop, which yearly falls between July and August, *The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism* (*JWTC*) with its own website.[3] Second, *The Salon* offers a virtual platform for the creation of a democratic audience in South Africa and internationally, thanks to the web technologies. Third, *The Network*, grants peer-to-peer communication. Fourth, '*The Blog* is the platform for ongoing, almost realtime dialogues, with the *JWTC* offering a facilitatory

[2] P. Geschiere, "Is There 'A' Postcolonial Condition?", in L. Allen, A. Mbembe (eds.), *The Johannesburg Salon*, vol. 1, (2009), 23-26: 23.

[3] I owe this insight to prof. Annalisa Oboe (University of Padua), President of the Italian Association for the Study of Cultures and Literatures in English (AISCLI), the only Italian academic who had been invited to the very first meeting in Johannesburg in preparation for the theoretical approach to the whole series of workshops.

function through a moderator. The four platforms interact among themselves bouncing dialogues and igniting more structured articles and contributions to the yearly issues of the Journal.

This articulated critical project, a web-related and web-relational pattern rather than a theory, which systematically and endemically questions our contemporary world, asks of us all to position ourselves, and to de-center our position, and clearly gives voice to a new Avant-guarde. It has the status of a critical, artistic, intellectual and philosophical Avant-guarde that has its metropolitan basis in the so-called World's geographical South. This new, not necessarily youngish, and not necessarily southern, intelligentsia includes Johannesburg based Achille Mbembe, a brilliant historian and sociologist, originally from Camerun, and his wife, Sarah Nuttal, a literary and cultural critic, and then Lara Allen, a sociologist, and Sara Calburn, an architect; the Chicago based couple Jean (an anthropologist and economist) and John (an africanist anthropologist) Comaroff; New York based Arjun Appadurai, an Indian social anthropologist; Paul Gilroy, a British cultural studies theorist; Ato Quayson, a Ghanaian professor of English and Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto together with many more photographers, visual artists, literary critics, historians. Hospitality and democratic dialogue are the principles that pull together these intellectuals, yet what characterizes them all as a new Avant-guarde is the programmatic practice to challenge our viewpoint and to attempt to look at the world from down up, 'from a base in the South', as they claim and write:

> If it is the case that knowledge production is the primary means through which the wealth of nations is created, it is also the case that most acknowledged knowledge is produced in the West (or the global North). We wish to shift, if even only slightly, the nature of global scholarly debates and public conversations that are currently dominated by the perspectives of the North and West. We see this *Salon*, therefore, as a global initiative emanating from

> the South. To facilitate this orientation, we have assembled a core group of writers comprised of scholars and intellectuals who are literally and figuratively based in the South. Figurative situatedness is made necessary by the complex reality of the global circulation and traffic of individuals that characterises the contemporary academy. We recognise that while physically some writers may be partially, or even wholly, hosted in Northern or Western institutions, their political, intellectual and/or aesthetic orientation is of the South.[4]

As is evident from this programmatic passage, the interdisciplinary approach among the artistic productions and the scholarly productions converges to the creation of new aesthetic practices in postcolonial discourse, promoting and advocating non-hierarchical relations among the various arts. Provocation, polemical attitude, experimentation are the keywords of this, as well as of previous avant-guarde movements. To summarize the spirit of this enterprise and challenge Achille Mbembe coined the expression 'politics and ethics of mutuality', not only among scholars from different parts of the world, but precisely between the episteme and pre-packed knowledge of the North and West and the new challenging episteme and knowledge produced in the Global South.

One of the principles that moves Mbembe's writing is intellectual honesty:

> I believe that what matters is to think ethically, sincerely and responsibly. As far as Africa is concerned, a measure of our sincerity is for instance whether we succeed to write about human experience in this region of the world without trivializing it or provoking misplaced empathy or contempt.[5]

[4] L. Allen, A. Mbembe, "Editorial: Arguing For A Southern Salon", *The Johannesburg Salon*, vol. 1, (2009): 1-3: 1.

[5] A. Oboe, "Africa And the Night of Language. An Interview with Achille Mbembe", *The Johannesburg Salon*, vol. 2, (2010), 76-80: 77.

Actually, one way to take postcolonial theories down to earth again, so to speak, is to connect those theories to real people, or, as Mbembe says: "to write about human experience without trivializing it". This is, for instance, what the Italian ethnopsychiatrist Roberto Beneduce – director of the Frantz Fanon Centre in Turin – does with his studies on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in refugees and asylum seekers who flee from wars, famines, ethnic cleansing, dictatorships. Quoting Beneduce is quite relevant here, because he shares with Mbembe the attempt at keeping alive the teachings of the Martinican philosopher, psychiatrist, writer and activist intellectual Frantz Fanon.[6]

Another common misplaced idea about the 'postcolonial' is that it is a theory about 'the other' or others. In fact, this is a wrong assumption. Jane Comaroff, with the pretext of analysing the film *District 9*,[7] a very recent example of science fiction set in South Africa, demonstrates that postcolonial thinking is meant to better understand 'us' and our future:

> It urges us to understand why it is that the treatment of strangers emerges as a yardstick of universal human rights and social justice. *District 9*, like anthropology, makes plain that what is happening most evidently in ex-centric places teaches us not about aliens, but about ourselves, about our world, about its contradictions. Those faraway places, in other worlds, pre-figure in many ways what we ourselves are becoming.[8]

Apart from being a methodology by which to question established western discourses, and an indirect way of thinking that, by analyzing the other and the ex-centric, questions the present and the future of our civilization, postcolonial thinking is a new way

[6] R. Beneduce, *Archeologie del trauma: Un'antropologia del sottosuolo*, Roma, Laterza, 2002.

[7] N. Blomkamp, *District 9*, Peter Jackson Production, USA-South Africa, 2009.

[8] J. Comaroff, "Cool Reflections From Hot Places: The Use of 'Ex-Centricity'", *The Johannesburg Salon*, vol. 3, (2010), 32-35: 34.

to define humanism and to put it at the centre of our practice and experience, as it was during the Renaissance. For, Jane Comaroff warns us about ways of thinking to the future, and Achille Mbembe echoes her concerns, also stressing not so much the possibility but the necessity of utopia: "If the possibilities of utopian thinking have receded, what are the conditions of a radical, future-oriented politics in this world and in these times?" [9]

The answer to this necessity for a new humanism is found by Mbembe in the attempt at reimagining democracy not only as a form of human mutuality and freedom, but also as a community of life. Provocatively, he even claims that:

> In order to confront the ghost in the life of so many, the concepts of "the human", or of "humanism", inherited from the West will not suffice. We will have to take seriously the anthropological embeddedness of such terms in long histories of "the human" as waste. (2011: 10)

Furthermore, this humanism has its roots in the thinking and theorizations of Frantz Fanon, a scholar to whom Paul Gilroy, Achille Mbembe and Roberto Beneduce have turned, establishing an interesting kind of dialogue. Paul Gilroy starts by analysing a statement by Fanon, where the critic mentions "the real dialectic between my body and the world" (2011: 11). Again, a way to turn postcolonial thinking into a down to the earth practice and experience. Particularly after the UNESCO's etymological appropriations there is the need to reformulate the human in both human rights and humanitarian intervention since those expressions and practices have initiated a more serious conflict than the one imagined by Fanon.

Significantly enough, the issue number 354 (April-June 2012) of the prestigious Italian philosophical journal *Aut Aut* includes a sort of dialogue and confrontation between Beneduce and Mbembe on

[9] A. Mbembe, "Democracy as a Community of Life", *The Johannesburg Salon*, vol. 4, (2011), 1-10: 5.

"postcolonial thinking", thanks to Annalisa Oboe's mediation, very much in the light of a tribute to the eminent figure of Frantz Fanon. This special and fascinating issue follows by one year another milestone issue of *Aut Aut*, number 349 (January-March 2011) dedicated to the "Italian postcolonial". What is striking is that only nowadays, quite late, Italian philosophers do claim a disciplinary space for postcolonial discourse.[10]

Further, what is even more striking is the accusation that these philosophers move towards postcolonial literary studies. In particular, they claim that postcolonial literary studies have advocated to themselves a reflection on "the game" of difference which the literary text helps to revive not as personal experience, but as a layering of a collective, therefore universal, experience. In addition, they claim that some postcolonial critics have proposed their field of study as "the only" discourse which is able to articulate difference, while criticising Foucault, Derrida or Deleuze, whose "guilt" would be not to have acknowledged the eurocentric epistemology which constitutes the very basis of their own philosophical production.

It is indeed surprising to read these words, and it is difficult to detect whom exactly the Italian philosophers have in mind, since the immediate reference seems to be to the editors of the well-known collection of essays *The Empire Writes Back*.[11] Whatever the editors' failures might be, it is unthinkable that postcolonial literary studies can do without Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze. These thinkers are really worldly recognized as the triggers of discourses on difference, outsidedness, state control, resistance, and their voices precisely ignited the de-construction of the phallogocentric discourse of European philosophy. They are the fathers – among others – of alternative cognitive as well

[10] *Il postcoloniale in Italia*, G. Leghissa (ed.), *Aut Aut*, n. 349, (gennaio-marzo 2011), Il Saggiatore, Milano. *Per un pensiero postcoloniale*, *Aut Aut*, n. 354, (aprile-giugno 2012), Il Saggiatore, Milano.

[11] B. Ashcroft, G. Griffith, H. Tiffin (eds.), *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London, Routledge, 2001.

as imaginary models, such as the nomadic rhizome, to name but one. Gajatry Spivak and Homi Bahbha would be unthinkable without those very predecessors.

*Aut Aut* depicts postcolonial critics as naïf. Such portrait culminates in claiming that what is meant by the famous proposal of "decolonising the mind" cannot be rooted exclusively in literary production, or in its relative critical analysis, or in the Literary Departments. All the Humanities should undergo a process of decolonization and take charge of the postcolonial question, a question that crosses knowledge in its various forms and expressions. The latter closing statement is the only possible sensible conclusion. Giovanni Leghissa's discourse implies a cross-disciplinary approach to the postcolonial question, one wich should not privilege philosophy, anyway, among the Humanities.[12]

One of the most fascinating principles of which the postcolonial critic is conscious is that while approaching postcolonial literature one has to become also an ethno-anthropologist, a historian, a sociologist, a geographer, a philosopher, a linguist to say the least. The impossibility of such an omniscient knowledge leaves us with the precise idea that at least a dialogue among all these disciplines is the only a-priori possibility of any discourse on postcolonial literature. Moreover, does Frantz Fanon, with his *Black Skin, White Masks*, write as a philosopher, as a psychiatrist, or as a novelist? For, after all, is that not his autobiography? Is Homi Bhabha writing only from the point of view of the cultural studies critic, or of the literary critic? Is Edouard Glissant only a poet, a critic, or a philosopher, with his relational poetics or in his theorizing the "chaos-monde"?[13] How can the literary critic ignore Derrida's own origins as an Algerian, his theory of the *differance*? How can the literary critic forget, that the category of "the

[12] G. Leghissa, "Il luogo disciplinare della postcolonia", *Aut Aut*, n. 349, quoted, pp. 14-168.

[13] E. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by B. Wing, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

other" and "otherness", is based on Lacan's category of the unconscious as the discourse of the Other? How can the literary critic avoid Foucault's ideas about "punishment",[14] or Deleuze and Guattarri's counter philosophy of nomadism and the rhizome?[15] These are the voices that have based their own theoretical works on a mixing of genres, on a breaking of boundaries and hierarchies among disciplines, sometimes using a lyric or a narrative style so typical of literary productions that postcolonial theory is almost a natural – as well as a temporal – consequence of such an arena of debates.

Several are the topics that may cross various disciplines and of which literature carries the traces, among them ecology and ecocriticism seem best to satisfy Leghissa's interdisciplinary principles nowadays. Based on biology, on science at large, as well as on ethics and philosophy, concern for the environment is certainly universal, across countries and cultures and it even unites the West and the East, the North and the South. Thus, the traditional opposition between the city and the countryside is reinterpreted today in new and more dramatic terms than at the origins of urbanization and industrialization.

The four chapters of this volume, dedicated to literary works by Ivan Vladislavić, a South African novelist and short stories writer, by Marlene Creates and by Margaret Atwood, respectively a land artist and a prize winning novelist, poet and essayst from Canada, show exactly how postcolonial literature can grant the dramatization of discourses that blend urban planning, individual existentialism, control and security policies, the media, forms of art, immigration and ethnic coexistence, with the biodiversity of specific ecosystems, the ethics and aesthetics of land art and botanic, and a new ecocritical religion or philosophy of gardening.

The first two chapters dedicated to Vladislavić's urban short

[14] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by A. Sheridan, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977.
[15] S. Bignall, P. Patton (eds.), *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

pieces of prose analyse Johannesburg as still pervasively characterized by gated communities and high walls. In this case literature bears witness not so much to a personal or communal experience of difference, but to past and present historical traumas. Indeed, the scars of apartheid are now materially embodied by architectural barriers that end up endangering communication and extinguishing social relations. Existential alienation and incommunicability are actually paired with Foucaultian security and control systems, visible and invisible, real and psychological walls.

On the background of De Certeau's practices of everyday life,[16] such as walking (*flânerie*), driving through the city streets and arteries, viewing the cityscape from the top of a skyscraper, Vladislavić erases the peculiarities of Johannesburg and elevates it to a dreamlike status of anonymous, universal symbol of a contemporary huge metropolis. Here, a man and a woman cannot meet, nor can they communicate for apartheid's heritage has left them among unsurpassable barriers. In opposition, however, Johannesburg does not lose its character of a city crossed by migrants from other African regions. Its beggars, its highways, its gated communities speak the language of a city of the South, of an African city. Particularly its high walls, always multiplying and developing into more and more sophisticated security systems equipped with cameras, armed response systems, electrified barbed wire, sometimes one on top of the other, stigmatize Johannesburg permanent state of siege.[17]

These historical traumas which have affected people individually and collectively, and have left such visible traces in the urban planning, architecture as well as in the mind, as Nadine Gordimer

[16] M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. By S. Rendall, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988; M. De Certeau, *Heterologies*, trans. By B. Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

[17] C. Concilio, Villa Toscana *a Joannesburg, di Ivan Vladislavić*, in P. De Gennaro (ed.), *L'Italia nelle scritture degli altri*, Torino, Trauben, 2011, pp. 119-132.

used to claim years ago,[18] leave room to a discourse on nature which characterizes even the urban narratives of Canada. That Canada is electively the country of environmentalism and eco-consciousness is self-evident from its overwhelming nature which since colonial times has invaded its literature.

While it is so natural for Marlene Creates to poetically and artistically illustrate, represent, voice the Boreal Forest of Newfoundland, translating it into various artistic forms, Torontonian writers cannot avoid facing the peculiar geomorphology of the city site and particularly of its ravines as unconscious green alter-egos of the city itself. More recently, what I termed a typical undercurrent of ecocriticism in Canadian Literature[19] has turned to more radical engagement, to the point that a Torontonian novelist like Anne Michaels deploys a character who secretly transplants little water plants from the beds of dried-up rivers to the gardens and parks and even to the pavements of Toronto. This arboreal and vegetal guerrilla becomes a metaphor for Canada itself as a country of up-rooted migrants.

A new guerrilla characterizes also Atwood's latest novel *The Year of the Flood* (2009), where "the Bible and the rifle" – such uncomfortable symbols of colonialism – are at work now in a dystopian world where the city has completely disappeared to leave space to gangs opposing each other and Security Corps as substitutes for political authorities. The new religion/philosophy of the God's Gardners involves sustainable agriculture, recycling, natural medicines and cures, euthanasia, pollution, but also plastic surgery and birth control, while they fight or try to resist new epidemics and contagion. All issues linked to the biopolitics of contemporary life. Yet, this young group of guerrilla gardeners, in spite of living a communal life of sharing and cooperating on equal terms,

[18] C. Concilio, "Il muro nella mente": Nadine Gordimer tra nuova e vecchia censura, *Antropologia*, Roma, Meltemi, 2002, no. 2, pp. 115-137.
[19] C. Concilio, *Introduction*, in C. Concilio, R. Lane (eds.), *Image Technologies in Canadian Literatrure. Narrative, Film, and Photography*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 13-30.

as peers, ends up guarding with gun and preaching what is left of the planet, which they will colonize as lonely future survivors.

Thus the unavoidable urban landscape of South Africa as well as the unavoidable natural landscape of Canada become the sites of the new humane, ecocritical discourse which speaks for the right to a better world or at least the right to what remains of the present world, without providing easy, ready-made or happy endings.

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*Chapter 1*

# THE WALL AS SHIFTING SIGNIFIER IN IVAN VLADISLAVIC'S WORKS

> QUINCE: Ay, or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine. Then, there is another thing: we must have a wall in the great chamber; for Pyramus and Thisbe says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall.
> SNOUT: You can never bring in a wall. What say you, Bottom?
> BOTTOM : Some man or other must present Wall; and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify 'wall'; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisbe whisper. (III.i.54-66)[1]

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the wall should be "signified"; it is both signifier and signified, it is both a barrier and a breach, it works as an obstacle and as a concession to communication, it separates and somehow unites the two mythic lovers of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[2] This metamorphic mutability of

[1] W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, S. Wells and G. Taylor (eds.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988.

[2] "'Pyramus and Thisbe, he the loveliest youth, and she the most sought after girl, the East held, lived in neighbouring houses, in the towering city of Babylon, that Semiramis is said to have enclosed with walls of brick. Their nearness and their first childhood steps made them acquainted and in time love appeared. They would have agreed to swear the marriage oath as well, but their parents prevented it. They were both on fire, with hearts equally captivated, something no parent can prevent. They had no one to confide all this to: nods and signs were their speech, and the more they kept the fire hidden, the more it burned.
There was a fissure, a thin split, in the shared wall between their houses, which traced back to when it was built. No one had discovered the flaw in all those years

the wall itself as signifier is the attribute that will be studied in relation to the wall as an icon in South African literature. For the wall is definitely one of the icons that work as shifting and metamorphic signifiers in South African reality. It is such a rooted icon that it characterises continuously the history of colonial South Africa from its early origins to its present post-apartheid condition of postcolony. This study will focus on the works by Ivan Vladislavić and his representations of the wall as signifier in the urban context of Johannesburg. And the present analysis will move from Achille Mbembe's assumption that recent South African urban narratives seem to "explore among them an emergent ethic of hospitality in the city" (Mbembe 2008: 214). Thus, the philosophic swinging between hospitality and hostility, *Mitsein* and *Dasein* will be explored in the terms that Hillis Miller attributes to Heidegger and to Derrida, among others, and will be connected with the icon of the wall as signifier in the South African context.

The wall as artwork. In one of his narrative fragments of *Portrait with Keys. The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (2006), Vladislavić discusses, together with his own brother and a Chinese friend artist, Jeff Lok, the possibility of building a kind of democratic, transparent, memorial wall in Johannesburg, encapsulating small objects donated by all the people living there. A project of inclusiveness, showing the life of a community working together with the conscience of being and living with others (*Mitsein*).

– but what can love not detect? – You lovers saw it first, and made it a path for your voices. Your endearments passed that way, in safety, in the gentlest of murmurs. Often, when they were in place, Thisbe here, and Pyramus there, and they had each caught the sound of the other's breath, they said 'Unfriendly wall, why do you hinder lovers? How hard would it be for you to let our whole bodies meet, or if that is too much perhaps, to open to the kisses we give each other? Not that we are not grateful. We confess that we owe it to you that words are allowed to pass to loving ears.' So they talked, hopelessly, sitting opposite, saying, as night fell, 'Farewell', each touching the wall with kisses that could not reach the other side." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 55-92.

"The Great Wall of Jeff" would be a challenging dream to preserve both the collective and the individual memory of the City of Gold, as Johannesburg is called:

> The city is saturated with death, Jeff said, it is passing away even as we speak […] We must build to commemorate, while there is still time, not just the famous or the fallen, but… everyone. Every person in the Greater Johannesburg area, identified by the voters' roll, must be required to donate an object to the artist for use in the work. This object shall be no larger than a standard brick and shall be enclosed in due course in a transparent resin block of those very dimensions. These object-enclosing bricks will be used in turn to construct a wall. The Great Wall of Jeff. (Vladislavić 2006: 43)

The three friends start questioning the problems of costs and funds raising, sponsorship, materials, realization. A few claims, however, catch our attention. Vladislavić's brother, Branko asks: "how on earth will you get people in this greedy town to give things away?" The answer, although similarly striking, is a reference to the social contradictions of a metropolis like Johannesburg: "But we're not looking for diamond rings and krugerrands, said Jeff, although I'll bet we get a couple of them." And then: "Why a wall? Half the city has already vanished behind walls. […] Why not something useful?" (45).

The reasoning about this hypothetical project moves from day-dreaming to conjectures about the monetary value of objects in one of the most exasperated capitalist societies in the world, to realistic considerations of the reinforced segregation of private spaces behind walls. This last observation attributes a specific meaning to the wall as signifier, that is, the wall becomes a measure of the present continuity with apartheid-bound feelings of fear, paranoia and segregation that materialize themselves in the mushrooming of walls. The exasperation of the *Dasein* philosophy seems to prevail, the exclusiveness created by walls around indi-

vidualism, privatization policies, protection of one's own space seems to exclude the idea of a possible community of beings in the plural.

Nevertheless, this Great Wall of Jeff, this work of art in paper, only imagined, and only existing in a piece of fiction writing, becomes real in the work of another local artist, Sue Williamson, as reported in another prose fragment by Vladislavić:

> *Mementos of District Six* is a cabin made of resin blocks. Enclosed in each block is an object or fragment that the artist Sue Williamson collected among the ruins of District Six after the removals: a shard of pottery, a scrap of wallpaper, a hairclip, a doll's shoe. (Vladislavić 2006: 77)

No matter how minimalist those objects are, or rather, right because of that, they appear moving to the eyes of a woman friend, who claims:

> It was just so moving, standing there like a kid in a Wendy house surrounded by these relics, worthless things made to seem precious, glowing like candles. As if each trinket and scrap had been a treasure to someone. (Vladislavić 2006: 77)

This exchange reverses the preceding passage, because the objects in this case seem much more precious than before. Being signifiers of the violent vanishing of a whole world, the by now mythical world of District Six, those mementos signify the absence of a community of people, the material destruction not so much of their houses but of their homes. Those mementos also signify the interiors of their lives and their own inner feelings and moods, they hint at a dignity in poverty and at a violent subtraction of meaning to the lives and the world of a whole communi-

ty.[3] If in the previous case greed, diamond rings, gold coins, and a price indicating the value of the objects were mentioned, here all the few objects named are priceless and valueless from a commercial point of view, and yet symbolically they are much more meaningful. Their meaning consisting in the aesthetic translation of a traumatic memory that triggers the connection of those real objects to the real black and coloured people who had suffered the forced removals of the Fifties and Sixties. In these two passages the wall as artwork becomes an inclusive structure of hospitality, for it ideally encapsulates a whole possibility of *Mitseienden,* of Being with others. In the sequel to the prose piece, Vladislavić imagines a whole community of people working together to build the wall, hanging their own objects with their name to its transparent surfaces in the celebration of an imaginary hybridity of architectural styles.

The wall as fortification. "The Journal of the Wall" is one of the most eloquent fragments on the wall as signifier in Vladislavić's texts; a short narrative about a couple of newly arrived neighbours, who engage themselves in the construction of an anonymous and aesthetically blank and dull brick-wall around their property, without any apparent reason to do so, and who, soon after the completion of it, put the property on sale and move somewhere else (Vladislavić 1989: 23-44). In spite of the fact that – although just for one moment – the wall seems "not

[3] "I don't mean to romanticize the architecture. This was a modest house: in size, construction and cost. Yet it provided a lifestyle that a working class family could afford. And its location within a 'community' of services made a difficult life bearable. […] One day a man in a grey suit came to the door and told my grandmother that she and her family had to move. […] That night over supper my grandmother told her daughters that we had to move and that it was no use arguing or resisting. This kind of thing was happening all over the city, in Mayfair, Vrededorp, Malaycamp. People were being forced out and their houses razed to the ground." A. Dangor, in Vladislavić and Judin (1999: 359).

so much as a barrier between us, but as a meeting-point" it becomes again to the eyes of the first-person narrator the high and obscuring barricade it was meant to be. As it happens with Yuri Lotman's quite simple semiotic theory of space as divided between an "inside" and an "outside" that establish the border between "us" and "them", or "here" and "out there", also Vladislavić's narrator perfectly sees the Lotmanian different viewpoints: "The wall. They knew it from one side, I knew it from the other" (Vladislavić 1989: 39), and when he tries to establish a contact with the excuse of borrowing some sugar, he is denied access into the house, he is denied hospitality, he is excluded: "he stepped towards the door, as if to block my path. I was disappointed. I had hoped to gain access to the house, to measure their space against my imaginings." (Vladislavić 1989: 39) Not only Lotman, but also Derrida seems to be tested here, as according to Hillis Miller: "Jacques Derrida is unusual, if not unique, in explicitly denying that *Dasein* is *Mitsein*. His concepts of ethics and of community are consonant with this assumption of each ego's inescapable solitude. According to Derrida, I remain alone, on my own, however much I may be open to the ethical demand each other, though wholly other, makes on me."[4]

Vladislavić shows how these monads live separately according to an individualistic compulsion to close up against the external world, beings, demands. The wall, as an urban monument to uselessness, thus becomes a signifier, whose meaning reflects upon an unspoken paranoia, consisting in the almost compulsive and unconscious need to fence one's property and to protect oneself from the external world. The wall as signifier thus acquires here a clear meaning of hostility and rejection.

Ivan Vladislavić' and Hilton Judin's catalogue on "architecture, apartheid and after" starts with an essay on the "*Fort ende*

[4] Hillis Miller, "Derrida Einsled", *Critical Inquiry*, 33.2 (Winter 2007), pp. 248-276http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/511493, 20 April 2011).

*Thuijn*" tradition introduced by the first Dutch settlers at the Cape:

> In 1649 two officials of the Dutch East India Company drew up a report recommending the establishment of a '*Fort ende Thuijn*' at the Cape of Good Hope for the benefit of the Company's shipping between the Netherlands and Batavia.
> The '*fort*', as they described it elsewhere, was to accommodate a garrison of sixty to seventy men, and was obviously needed for protection […] As far as the proposed '*thuijn*' of the memorandum is concerned, this may be translated conventionally as a garden. […] In this particular context and period, however, the word might also mean a fence or palisade, an enclosure rather than the area so enclosed. Jan van Riebeeck, subsequently commander of the Dutch settlement established at the Cape, suggested enclosing the fields and meadows of the colonists with a dense hawthorn hedge, an idea which he carried out in part, and it is in this sense that I would prefer to interpret '*thuijn*' for my present purpose.
> Shelter, enclosure, keeping together, shutting out, protecting, defending, establishing a presence and ensuring its survival – the '*Fort ende Thujin*' envisaged by the Company seem potent images, encapsulating much of what was to be attempted in South Africa by white settlers over the following three centuries and more. (Vladislavić, Judin 1999: 34).

This idea/ideal of gardening-cum-fortification seems to have survived till nowadays, so that the wall remains a Lotmanian signifier of mighty barrier and a symbol of visible hostility. In the postcolony – as Achille Mbembe defines the new (South) Africa – walls are proliferating everywhere and, above all, around gated communities that present themselves as class-bound dwelling sites, fortified citadels in defence of private villas, gardens, pools and a suburban life-style that often enough are advertised as Tuscan-like villages.

"Villa Toscana", the setting of one of Vladislavić's short chapters in the novel *The Exploded View* (2004) is exactly such a fortified enclave in the north of Johannesburg. Its fake medieval heavy wooden gates, its fortified guardhouse, make up this "city-state", and create a "fortress-like atmosphere" (9) with its "boundary wall laced with electric fencing" (35). Apart from the surrounding high wall that also protects the suburb from the noise of traffic, this kind of island, as many other northern suburbs, is connected or plugged into the city only through the N3, a large motorway. Quite strikingly, about a similar suburban island, Melrose Arch, an architect claimed: "Should the security situation change, we will pull down the perimeter fence and connect back into the surrounding fabric. This development aims to become part of the city." (Bremner 2004: 124)

Not differently from the '*Fort ende Thuijn*' logic of the mid-Seventeenth Century, here, too, the wall becomes the Lotmanian signifier for "shelter, enclosure, keeping together, shutting out, protecting, defending, establishing a presence and ensuring its survival." (Judin, Vladislavić 1999: 34)

Yet, there is a final and even more striking way in which the wall nowadays becomes – through the irony of Vladislavić's narrative – a signifier, as well as a sort of self-generating encroaching and outgrowing complex security system:

> Walls replace fences, high walls replace low ones, even the highest walls acquire electrified wires and spikes. […]
> A stone wall is heightened with prefab panels, a prefab wall is heightened with steel palisades, the palisades are topped with razor wire. Wooden pickets on top of brick, ornate wrought-iron panels on top of plaster, blade wire on top of split poles. These piggyback walls (my own included) are nearly always ugly. But sometimes the whole ensemble achieves a degree of elaboration that becomes beautiful again. (Vladislavić 2006: 170)

Johannesburg seems to explode into an apotheosis of more and more elaborate walls mirroring each other, creating a maze of self-reflective and ever multiplying similar, silent and hostile surfaces. The prototype of this hostility is the wall-plus-razor-bladed wire of Nadine Gordimer's gruesome short story "Once Upon a Time" (1989), the fable of the happy middle class white family whose fortified wall as security system does not aim outwards, against external enemies, but on the contrary, it aims inwards against the little boy of the house, killing him.

The wall as silent script. An instance in which a wall ends up silencing history through its anonymous dullness is provided by Vladislavić in another series. Fragment number 10 and number 40 in *Portrait with Keys* record the metamorphosis of a neighbouring garden wall in Blenheim Street n. 10:

> Not long after Minky and I came to live in Blenheim Street, new people moved into the house at No. 10. And not long after that, they employed a woman to paint a Ndebele design on their garden wall. As I was passing by one morning, I saw her marking out the pattern with a felt-tip pen on the white surface, and over the following days I went up the road regularly to watch her progress. When she had finished the pattern, an immense maze of black lines six or seven meters long and two meters high, she began to fill it in with paint – mainly blue and grey, if memory serves me correctly. (Vladislavić 2006: 22-23)

Ivan Vladislavić matches this enterprise with a new trend in the South Africa of the Nineties, the explosion of murals and graffiti, either with decorative patterns or with political messages, in the latter case both democratic and racist ones.[5] Here, he is a partisan spectator of what he considers an attempt at creatively

[5] See E. Deliory-Antheaume, "Leggere la città a muri aperti. Graffiti e murali del nuovo Sudafrica", *Africa e Mediterraneo* 1 (1999): 22-27.

decorating and embellishing the wall as signifier. He is adamantine in his enthusiasm, in spite of being also well-conscious of the inauthenticity of such an attempt and of the appropriation of indigenous art to be sold as exotica:

> There was a fad for Ndebele painting at that time. A woman called Esther Mahlangu had been commissioned to coat a BMW 525 in Ndebele colours as part of an advertising campaign. Or was it an art project? Either way, it was a striking symbolic moment in the invention of the new South Africa, a supposedly traditional, indigenous culture laying claim to one of the most desirable products our consumer society had to offer. (Vladislavić 2006: 23)

Actually, in 2007, on the occasion of an Exhibition on contemporary African art in my hometown, Torino, Mahlangu reproduced similar patterns on a FIAT 500, one of the symbols of Torino as the Italian car-factory capital.

*Mahlangu next to her Fiat 500*
http://www.eartharchitecture.org/index.php?/archives/989-Mud-Brick-and-the-Automobile.html[6]

[6] Last accessed 8 April 2011. See *Why Africa?* (La collezione Pigozzi), Torino, ELECTA Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, 2007.

In contrast, Vladislavić's friend Liz is vehemently critical in front of such an operation. She believes that the Ndebele fashion is kitsch. One of her arguments concerns the fact that Ndebele wall painting is no more than a few decades old, it is constantly changing, and it is full of contemporary references. Furthermore, Liz believes the wall is so cheerful to appear absolutely fake and "you" white people like it right because it is nice and tidy (24).

In contrast, Vladislavić's fear that "some racist would deface it" is nevertheless met by the determination a new dweller of the house manifests some three years later in erasing that improvised, and naïf, work of art:

> He went to stand on the other side of the street. Like a woodsman sizing up a tree, just before he chopped it down.
> I couldn't watch. […] He had started on the left. He was hacking into the pattern, obliterating it with extravagant swipes of the roller. Standing back from time to time, to admire his handywork. As if there was anything to see but an act of vandalism. The man must be a brute, I thought. It would be a man, too, the very antithesis of the woman who had painted the mural.
> The new owner was remaking the place in his own style. Ndebele murals are an acquired taste, after all. […] They painted it a lemony yellow with green trim, a petrol-station colour scheme. It took a couple of coats; after the first one, you could still see the African geometry developing, like a Polaroid image, as the paint dried. (Vladislavić 2006: 57)

The story of the "Ndebele wall" in a white suburb of Johannesburg is again symbolic of the tendency to re-establish and reinforce the wall as a dull signifier that does not project or produce any signification. The attempt at signification provided by the female owner, although not authentic African art, but rather a simple colourful decoration, was a way to rewrite the history of South Africa and to re-inscribe it into the urban and architectural landscape of Johannesburg, from which it had been violently ex-

punged and exiled in the past. The traditionally racist patriarcal, or patronizing attitude of the white, male owner simply and easily erases and negates black South African history, its people and art. This blind and obtuse attitude confirms that Johannesburg is still living under the evil spell of apartheid's legacy. Even though in a later fragment, No. 66, the author redeems the man who erased the painting ("He is a sensitive man, not a butcher […] a pragmatist" 85) and defines his action as a 'pentimento'.[7]

However, this gender-biased erasure of a woman's work also deserves a final consideration. Vladislavić did not see the painted wall as a nostalgic attempt to retrieve the past and lost traditions of indigenous South Africa. He was rather looking ahead, at a future when people might consider that painted wall as an "authentic" artwork: "Who's to say what will be regarded as "authentic" a generation from now?" (23). The memory of the paint and of the pattern remains as a palimpsest's presence, ghostly looming from underneath that once again anonymous blank and dull yellowish-coated wall.

The wall as signifier. There are attempts, although anonymous, to make suburban walls speak a new language. Vladislavić becomes the spectator of one of his neighbour's artistic enterprises:

> he decided to put all the leftover pots of paint in his garage to good use by painting a mural on his garden wall. It is the ugliest mural in the whole city: a basket of flowers; a dog with mad eyes and spiky whiskers; a dim-witted sun, with a wry mouth and a set of stiff rays standing out like a bad haircut; a bird of paradise perched on one of the sunbeams; a red brick wishing-well. (Vladislavić 2006: 37)

[7] "In her book *Pentimento*, Lillian Hellman took this process as a metaphor for the writing of a memoir. The appearance of the original conception and the second thought, superimposed within the same frame, is 'a way of seeing and then seeing again'." (Vladislavić 2006: 85)

Here the kitsch effect is only mitigated by the friendship that the first-person narrator has established with Eddie, his neighbour, the representative of one of the rare human exchanges which appear in the book as sincere, as an example of *Mitsein*, of Being with others.

There is another fragment where the author's narrative alter-ego notices a little toy encased in a diamond shaped hole in a wall and he automatically grasps it and brings it to his working desk. There it stands, the tiny zoo-keeper, for a couple of days, before he returns it to its place, where it mysteriously remains out of place, for a month, unnoticed or forgotten, until he grabs at it again and keeps the toy as a guardian of his own writing. Like the valueless objects to be donated for the memorial wall, the little toy is here first encased in a wall and then in the writing of Vladislavić, thus becoming an anomaly, a speaking – even if childish – memento.[8]

Further references to walls as apartheid memorials and therefore as signifying and speaking walls occur frequently in this work, as well as records of new signs and signposts, billboards and painted plaques on which Vladislavić practices his skills as a professional text editor and proof reader, by stressing the numberless spelling oddities and mistakes. This latter feature of the new South Africa becomes a sign of hospitality, too, because it shows how Johannesburg develops as a democratic space, where the ever-growing informal economy and private enterprise flourish everywhere through a creative plurality of languages and idioms, thanks to the new (and sometimes illiterate) migrants, right as in *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) the novel dedicated to the corruption of the language, where "restless" literally means a Supermarket that is open 24 hours a day.

[8] S.A. Murray, "Ivan Vladislavić and What-What: Among Writers, Readers and 'other odds, sods and marginals'", *Current Writing* 21:1-2 (2009): 138-158.

Conclusions: The wall as metaphor. Johannesburg has been compared to Belfast and to Berlin, yet it could also recall Nicosia, or Beirut, or Jerusalem as emblem of all the divided cities along racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic or caste and class barriers. Nadine Gordimer was engaged with her son Hugo Cassirer, a film director, to detect the signifying affinities between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of apartheid in 1990, collecting video interviews of writers of the ex-GDR and writers who had been victims of the apartheid regime. The documentary *Johannesburg-Berlin, The Wall in the mind* had been presented at the International Literature Festival in Berlin in 2001 and was received warmly.[9] The historical connections are too obvious to be listed here, what is important to Gordimer is that the material fall of walls has not led to the destruction of mental walls of prejudice, racism, suspect, individualism and pessimism. Moreover the obliteration of memory through simple amnesia, at that time, was a paramount concern to Gordimer.

But walls always present a signifying crack, or using the Shakespearian words a chink, a cranny, or a breach a leaking through which a discourse of freedom, openness, inclusion, and hospitality breaks out. In his novel *Age of Iron,* Coetzee was writing about the old and dying South Africa: "The one border they cannot close: the border upward, between the Republic of South Africa and the empire of the sky" (1990: 23) he was alluding to the radio broadcasting and radio waves that cannot be stopped by physical barriers. Christa Wolf's 1963 novel *Der Geteilte Himmel* (later a film by Konrad Wolf in 1964) was hinting at the same sky overarching the wall as signifier, artificially dividing the city. Similarly, the title of the 1987 film by Wim Wenders *Der Himmer Über Berlin* was

[9] C. Concilio, "'Il muro nella mente': Nadine Gordimer tra vecchia e nuova censura", *Antropologia* 2:2 (2002): 115-137; "Johannesburg-Berlin: The Wall in the Mind", Interview with Nadine Gordimer by C. Concilio, *Le tradizioni del moderno. Memoria e oblio*, V. Gianolio (ed.), Torino, Tirrenia, 2002, pp. 127-134.

hinting at a commonality that manifested itself along the vertical paradigm of below and above, the closeness of the world of men and the sky of angels, a vertical paradigm that also included the horizontal axis, alluding to the inclusion of the two sides of the city, East and West Berlin.

As a conclusion it seems that any wall can signify, in itself, or according to the side from which it is observed. It can signify inclusion and exclusion, blocking or allowing access, building or destroying. Furthermore, it allows the layering of more meanings by encapsulating mementos or erasing them. It can be dull and dumb, even anonymous, or it can host scripts and signatures. Yet, it is a persistent and resistant icon of hostility against hospitality in South Africa today, as it was in the past.

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*Chapter 2*

# ROMEO AND JULIET AT VILLA TOSCANA, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA. A POST-APARTHEID AND POSTMODERN REWRITING BY IVAN VLADISLAVIĆ

The season of postcolonial rewritings and the practice of "writing back" – which was celebrated by Salman Rushdie in his famous phrase 'the Empire writes back'[1] – subsequently borrowed as title of the groundbreaking essay *The Empire Writes Back* –[2] has not exhausted its strength yet. For instance, both Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry for Winnie Mandela. A Novel* (2003) and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) revolve around the mythological figure of Penelope, the first by *indigenizing* it through Winnie Mandela and the *ibandla*, that is the circle of black women,[3] the second by still presenting it as a white myth, concerning the twelve *subaltern* maids.

Besides, in South Africa, Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse* (1997), Nadine Gordimer's *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black And Other Stories* (2007) and André Brink's *Other Lives* (2008), all refer back to Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and imply a rhetoric of transformation. Thus, in general, these few examples show that the

[1] Salman Rushdie, "The Empire Writes Back With a Vengeance", *Times* (3 July 1982), p. 8.

[2] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back,* New York, Routledge, 1989.

[3] "Think of all the possible coincidences in life. What is the possibility of our four descendants of Penelope meeting in a room one day and talking? Yet, unknown to us, they've done so. They have been doing so countless times all over the land, over the decades, constituting themselves each time into an *ibandla*." Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry for Winnie Mandela. A Novel,* Claremont, Cape Philip, 2003, p. 35.

practice of rewriting has not ceased. Certainly, what first strikes the reader is that the British canon is no longer – or not necessarily – the target of a discourse of resistance, parody, reversal, or abrogation (to use a keyword from *The Empire Writes Back*, 1989, 38). These examples deploy a dialogue with a classic of Mediterranean Europe: *The Odyssey*, as Tennyson, Joyce and Walcott had initiated, as well as *Mittel*-European Modernism, thus marking the affiliation of postcolonial literature to high Modernism. Finally, Jhumpa Lahiri's loose rewriting of Gogol's short story "The Overcoat", in her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) is another example of this "use" of the European canon at large, while Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) as a revisiting of Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, and Indra Sinha *Animal's People* (2007) as one among various rhizomatic, derivative narratives blossomed after Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) show the latest trend of postcolonial rewritings of – by now – postcolonial classics.[4]

In contrast, "Villa Toscana" – the first of four short narratives that shape the novel *The Exploded View* (2004) by Ivan Vladislavić[5] – shows explicit intertextual references to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*,[6] albeit transposed to a completely different context.[7] Thus, the narrative can be considered a proper post-apartheid (and postmodern) re-writing of the world's most famous tragedy of the British literary tradition. Therefore, the aim of this essay is twofold: first, it tries to show major correspondences between Vladislavić's text and its original source, second, it tries to

[4] Among others one could list Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000).

[5] Ivan Vladislavić, *The Exploded View,* Random House, 2004, abbreviated as *EV* in the text.

[6] All references to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are from the Arden edition, London, Routledge, 1988.

[7] See Michael Riffaterre's concept of "obligatory intertextuality" in "Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse", *Critical Inquiry*, 1984, 11, pp. 141-162.

relate the 'Italian' setting of that tragic romance to the changing urban and social landscapes of post-apartheid Johannesburg.[8]

To begin with, a few English idioms are like telling pictorial touches to the wider Shakespearean canvas. For instance, when offered a cup of coffee during one of his visits to Villa Toscana, Budlender (Romeo), the male protagonist of the story, intently observes Iris (Juliet): 'The sight of her long forefinger crooked through the ear of the mug was disquieting. He wanted to press his lips to her knuckles and taste sea-salt and lemon rind' (*EV* 27).

A final instance may suffice to show the role of passing literal correspondences, although transposed to a different time, setting and context. When Budlender pays a visit to Iris's bathroom, he is mesmerized by her many little bottles of perfumes and cosmetics, which he calls 'a little Manhattan of perfume bottles' (*EV* 38), and in this miniaturized vanity shop he also lists 'tortoiseshell clips' among other objects. This vision calls to the mind the description of the Apothecary by Romeo, who, among the many items that he sees, first registers a tortoise hanging on the wall. Here the whole passage deserves to be quoted at length:

[8] Ania Loomba's and Martin Orkin's *Post-colonial Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 1998) traces the relevance of some Shakespearen's texts to the South African context, in particular "'Tis not the fashion to confess': Shakespeare-Post-coloniality-Johannesburg, 1996" pp. 84-97, where Ania Loomba claims that *The Rape of Lucrece* and the 'confession' "function as a counter-hegemonic strategy for racial liberation", and "Shakespeare and Hanekom, *King Lear* and land: A South African perspective" (pp. 205-217), where Nicholas Visser argues that "Among the many things *King Lear* may be said to be 'about', the issue of land – of its control, its ownership, its forms of inhabitation and settlement, its relations to fundamental human needs[…] Martin Orkin in his pioneering work *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (1987), was the first to connect the play's concern with land to the history of dispossession in South Africa".

He had never seen such a mass of cosmetics. An immense feminine clutter of bottles, jars and tubes, doubled in the mirror behind. Sample sachets of moisturizer and eye make-up remover, cotton-wool balls in marshmallow colours, tubes of mascara, brushes and wands. Tortoiseshell clips, stretchy hair bands with scribbles of black hair caught in them, combs, tongs. A pink plastic razor, the flimsy kind of thing a woman would use. Emery boards, nail varnish, acetone.

(*EV* 37)

And in his needy shop a tortoise hung,
An alligator stuff'd, and other skins
Of ill-shap'd fishes; and about his shelves
A beggarly account of empty boxes,
Green earthen pots, bladders, and musty seeds,
Remnants of packthread, and old cakes of roses
Were thinly scatter'd to make up a show.

(V.i. 42-48)

In contrast, the most obvious departures from the original text are of course time – post-apartheid South Africa vs Renaissance Italy; setting – fake Tuscany vs imaginary Verona; genre – prose narrative vs drama; and style – today's language vs Elisabethan verse. Another major difference is the presence of only three main characters: Budlender, the male lover, Iris, the idealized woman, and the Guard, a substitute for the State and patriarchal powers of the original play.[9] Families are completely absent from the scene, as well as other important characters like Mercutio and the Nurse, who play such an important role in Shakespeare's play. In Vladislavić's narrative not only are the new Romeo and Juliet single individuals, adults representing only themselves, but also Juliet is not in love with Romeo. Thus, this modern Romeo's internal monologue is only a mirror of his intellectual male fantasies

[9] Minor characters are present in Valdislavić's text too, a street puppeteer, curio-sellers, a beggar, Warren, the only friend (Mercutio?), a crazy taxi driver, a naked man rolling inside a tyre.

projected onto an indifferent and unreachable Juliet –or Rosaline(?), as will be argued later on.

If Renaissance elevated sight (the eyes) and light to central elements in love sonnets, Vladislavić translates them into metanarrative postmodern discourses, all connected with visual metaphors, which enrich this short, yet complex, prose work. The first of these formal and structural paradigmatic metaphors is the "exploded view", that is, the image on do-it-yourself instruction manuals of a solid object "exploded" or dismembered into its component parts, all floating in mid-air, ready to be re-arranged into a three-dimensional puzzle (*EV* 171, 189-93). Moreover, this ability to de-construct a whole into its parts[10] and re-compose the puzzle perfectly fits in with the protagonist's compulsion for statistics (*EV* 6, 15, 33), another major trope in the text that accounts for Johannesburg's changing influx of peoples, of cars, of artefacts and art objects, of housing and infrastructures, and for many other representations of reality. A third important metaphor to interpret reality is the framed screen such as a pair of glasses, the window, the car windscreen, the TV screen, the camera lens and movement that create film-like sequences (*EV* 42-3). These glass barriers create a detached view of portions and fragments of a serialized and fictionalized reality (*EV* 23-5, 41), which also interrogate new aesthetic models in art (kitsch, fake, ethnic exotica) and architecture (theme parks and gated communities).

Three particularly important episodes mark out the plot and perfectly illustrate Vladislavić's indebtedness to De Certeau's the-

[10] "Budlender tilted his head so that the crack in his windscreen, a sunburst of the kind made by a bullet, centred on the vendor's body and broke him into pieces" (*EV* 4).

ory[11] of the empowering god-like view and to Foucault's theory of the panopticon[12]:

The Star Stop restaurant straddled the freeway. He found a table at the window, facing south, where he could see the cars rushing towards him. […] It was a perch made for a statistician he was suspended above a great demographic flow […] His eyes took in the stream of traffic, separated it out into its parts, dwelling on sizes and shapes and shades. […] He counted black cars for a minute, converted the sum into an hourly rate. He counted women drivers, did the conversion. Cars for men, cars for women. Rivers of drivers (*EV* 15).

He reached for the remote control, […] A man in an office, at the window, against a glass, looking out on a skyline, New York perhaps although he could not see the landmarks. A man in within a black space. The man moved from one empty room to another, running his image like a soft cloth over reflective surfaces, over the glass and steel housings of devices […] The camera followed him from above, a small white ideogram crawling across a shiny black floor. […] The camera went outside into the night […] New York, he was sure of it now… (*EV* 42).

One night not long afterwards, he dreams that he was walking in a foreign city, down avenues lined with skyscrapers. The buildings were like bars in a gigantic graph, but they were also perfume bottles, glass towers filled with liquids coloured like honey and brandy. The air was so thickly scented he could hardly breathe. He began to run, over tiles of tortoiseshell and pewter, gathering momentum painfully, step by step, until his feet detached from the earth and he found himself falling, horizontally, through the perfumed streets (*EV* 46).

[11] Vladislavić's indebtedness to De Certeau is evident also in one of the epigraph of his novel *Portrait With Keys. The City of Johannesburg Unlocked,* London, Portobello Books, 2006.

[12] Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* New York, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 195-228, translated from French by Alan Sheridan (1977).

These three sequences show respectively: the protagonist as the man inside the Foucaultian panoptical, "perched" at a high window, overlooking the traffic from a god-like perspective; an actor in an American film set in New York; the protagonist flying or gliding among skyscrapers in a scene that conflates Johannesburg, New York, Shakespeare's Apothecary (tortoiseshell) although translated into Iris's Manhattan of perfume bottles, and Icarus's myth. All three sequences show a vertical perspective, a kind of vertigo (risk of falling), and a god-like view:

> Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals. […] To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? When one goes up there […] his elevation transforms him into a voyeur. […] the exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive'.[13]

They also show the conjugation of power and knowledge as Foucault claimed in *Discipline and Punish*. However, Budlender remains an alienated individual, a failed transcending observer, a pedestrian *manqué* as well as a failed Icarus, bound up to his everyday driving and the impossibility of "eternal vigilance".[14]

The multiple, prismatic, exploded fragmentation of reality permeates the text to such an extent that even Shakespeare's original is irreverently and ludicrously reduced to bits and pieces of

[13] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Berkley, University of California Press, 1984, pp. 91-92, translated from French by Steven Randall.

[14] The various essays on Vladislavić's *The Exploded View* in the special issue on Ivan Vladislavić, edited by Gerald Gaylard and Michel Titlestad, *Scrutiny2. Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* (11:2, 2006) tackle some of the features here illustrated although none of them seems to pick up on the Shakespearian borrowings of *Romeo and Juliet*.

scattered quotations. One of the macroscopic borrowings from Shakespeare is the choice of names. Budlender literally means "buds provider", and Iris's name evokes the flower. This may be referred to Shakespeare's text, where men and women are often compared to flowers, and Romeo's first love is called Rosaline:

Iris. Her name was derived from a flower, he assumed, but it evoked the sea-green of her eyes, fixed upon him, upon a point inside him, as if what might be taken for a defect was in fact some special power of insight that allowed her to see through him.

(*EV* 28)

*Lady Capulet.* The valiant Paris seeks you for his love.
*Nurse.* A man, young Lady. Lady, such a man
As all the world – why, he's a man of wax.
*Lady Capulet.* Verona's summer hath not such a flower.
*Nurse.* Nay, he's a flower, in faith a very flower.
(I.iii.74-8)

*Juliet.* This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.
(II.ii. 121-3)

*Capulet.* Death lies on her like an untimely frost
Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.
(IV.v. 28-9)

Flower as she was, deflowered by him.
(IV.v. 37)

Iris is surrounded by a bougainvillea (*EV* 11), poppies (*EV* 12), tulips (*EV* 40) and a sunflower that becomes a leitmotif in the whole text (*EV* 12, 14, 31, 40). In her resounding flowery name and in her apparent chastity, Iris resembles chaste Rosaline

('Then she hath sworn that she will still live chaste?' I.i 215-216): 'She was inclined to conceal herself, he had noticed, beneath loose-fitting blouses and full skirts' (*EV* 29).[15]

If Romeo's family name in Shakespeare is what prevents him from setting foot at the Capulets', in Vladislavić's story Budlender's wrong numberplate replaces the "wrong" name, and this bar, which marks gated communities like Villa Toscana, might also be a homage to Baz Luhrmann's film,[16] where the two opposing gangs use cars with Capulets and Montagues printed on their respective plates:

The guard took the clipboard and went around to the back of the car to check the numberplate […] writing laboriously. […]
'Sorry sir, you've got the wrong number.' As if they were speaking on the telephone.
'I forgot. I changed to GP plates just last week.'
'It is a wrong number.' […]
Then he saw that the guard had already written it down in the column on the right, under the heading 'Incidents'.
'You cannot come in.' […]
Repelled at the ramparts...
(*EV* 8-9)

*Servant.* Find them out whose names are written here? It is written that the shoemaker should meddle with his yard, and the tailor with his last, the fisher with his Pencil, and the painter with his nets. But I am sent to find those persons whose names are here writ, and can never find what names the writing person hath here writ. I must to the learned. In good time.
(I.ii. 38-44)

*Servant.* Now I'll tell you without asking. My master is the Great rich Capulet, and if you be not of the house of Montagues I pray come and crush a cup of wine. Rest you marry.
(I.ii. 80-3)

[15] Iris particularly resembles Rosaline because she does not reciprocate Budlender's intellectual love: "Rosaline – Romeo's unseen, unheard, but often referred to- beloved, was to the Renaissance mind someone our hero plainly loved only conceptually, intellectually. That sort of "love" was not and could not be genuine, profound, and soul shaking. Nor was it generally reciprocated." (Bloom, 2004: xvii).
[16] Baz Luhrmann, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, Twentieth-Century Fox, USA, 1996.

In Vladislavić's Villa Toscana, a newly developed gated community of Johannesburg's northern Suburbia, a very professional security guard, armed with a notebook and Cerberus-like headed pencil, replaces the illiterate servant whom the Capulets sent on errand. Both emissaries of the patriarchal and feudal control are complete failures, and ultimately let in the 'wrong' Romeo. Thus, Budlender sees the irony of the pantomime of ramparts, gates and Guard and, embodying the new Romeo who is not admitted inside the gated community, worries about medieval tortures. Similarly, in Shakespeare, Sampson, the servant, grossly embodying his namesake, threatens the Montagues:

Would the defenders of this city-state pour down boiling oil if he ventured too close?
(*EV* 9)

*Sampson.* 'Tis true, and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall; therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall.
(I.i. 14-17)

The play on names then is carried on, when Budlender is face to face with Iris and has become self-confident so that this motif parallels more closely Shakespeare's central theme:

' "Mr Budlender…'
'Please call me Les.'
'Les most of the first page is fine….'
(*EV* 13)

'Mr Budlender?' She would not call him Les.
'Is there a problem?'
'I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute.'
(*EV* 39)

*Juliet.* O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name.
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
(II.ii. 33-6)

*Romeo.* I take thee at thy word.
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptis'd:
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.
(II.ii. 49-51)

Iris's refusal to call the man by his first name formally signals her detachment. Iris thus becomes an anti-Juliet. Iris du Plooy is twenty eight, twice as old as Juliet. She is an independent, working woman and not an adolescent who is madly in love. This major difference erases the "romanticism" that, among others, Harold Bloom sees in Shakespeare's text: 'the most persuasive celebration of romantic love in Western literature'.[17]

Iris only resembles Juliet in her little flaws: ('On her left cheek was a tiny scar. […] It was shaped like a boot and it reminded him of Italy' *EV* 33), while Juliet has a scar on her brow ('it had upon it brow / A bump as big as a young cockerel's stone' I.iii. 52-3). Iris also has a slight cast in one of her eyes, which 'evoked the sea-green of her eyes' (*EV* 28), while Juliet crying for the loss of Tybalt and Romeo also triggers a similar comparison: 'For still thy eyes, which I may call the sea, / Do ebb and flow with tears' (III.v. 131-2) sea-green only indirectly refers to the sea. In her appearance on television Iris seems 'unnaturally pale. An effect of the light' *EV* 41), like Juliet when Paris is mentioned as her pretender ('she looks as pale as any clout in the versal world' II.v. 201-2). Iris works at night, so she can only receive Budlender during the day, and this element clashes with Juliet's famous invocation to the night (III.ii 1-34). In contrast, it is Budlender who looks forward to seeing her at night on television.

Iris resembles Juliet when imagined, through the patronizing and stereotypical male gaze, within the window-frame[18] ('Budlender fancied that he could see Iris at one of the windows' *EV* 3), or within the paradigm of high-and-low (as referred to the

[17] Harold Bloom, "An Essay by Harold Bloom", in *Romeo and Juliet. The Annotated Shakespeare*, New Haven / London, Yale University Press, p. 199.

[18] Gilbert's and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) shows how nineteenth century women's literature is characterized by images of enclosure or framed portraits (paintings, looking-glasses, windows, coffins) which symbolize the boundaries of the patriarchal discourse.

balcony scene). However, rather than with a balcony, Iris is always associated with staircases:

She was waiting for him outside at the foot of a steep and narrow staircase, and when he had parked the car he followed her up the steps to her apartment.

(*EV* 12)

'Could I use the bathroom?' She pointed to a landing on the stairs, which must lead to the bedroom on the upper storey.

(*EV* 29)

*Nurse.* Hie you to church. I must another way
To fetch the ladder by the which your love
Must climb a bird's nest soon when it is dark.

(II.v. 73-5)

*Friar L.* Go, get thee to thy love as was decreed,
Ascend her chamber – hence, and comfort her.

(III.iv. 145-6)

*Romeo.* Farewell, farewell. One kiss, and I'll descend.

(III.v. 42)

Thus, the paradigm of verticality, of high and low, mimics the ups and downs of the lovers' hopes and fortunes, while also hinting at religious and mystical elevation, if not at a god-like view. Similarly, it implies the idea of the fall ('Falling in love. Falling? He had plunged off the edge of himself' *EV* 32), which will even occur at the end of the story, when Budlender dreams of flying over a foreign skyline of skyscrapers – an intra-textual reference to the "Manhattan of perfume bottles" – in a film-like sequence ('He found himself falling, horizontally, through the perfumed streets' *EV* 46). The paradigm of verticality is also complementary to the horizontal one of inside and outside – as well as of the joint concepts of place and displacement, dweller and exile – for both Romeo and Budlender are kept outside the room/house and then city/citadel (walls) of Verona/Villa Toscana by male authorities.

Budlender and Iris are presumably middle class and white, they live in separate worlds, unplugged from the rest of the city, and therefore also from each other, and in spite of his infatuation for her Budlender lives a life of no consequence, 'negligible, the unhappiest of statistical terms' (*EV* 33). We do not know much about Budlender, except that he speaks English and is able to recognize Afrikaans on hearing it. From her census form, we know instead that Iris learnt French while at school and consequently Budlender comments 'nothing indigenous' (*EV* 26), as if she were not even South African. Her tanned skin and her black curls as well as her scar in the shape of the boot-like map of Italy seem rather to allude to Mediterranean origins, though the text does not allow us to really ever know. On television she speaks either English (with an Afrikaans accent) or Afrikaans. Particularly, she speaks Afrikaans even when her partners speak native languages, and Budlender comments 'It is a fact that no more than two percent of white South Africans speak an African language' (*EV* 25). Thus including both Iris and himself in this statistical account of "whiteness". They might be separated by the language barrier, English vs Afrikaans, and more so by the social barrier, middle class media starlet vs petty bureaucrat and clerk, or by the urban barrier, fashionable gated community resident vs anonymous neighbourhood dweller.

The fact that Iris is a TV announcer – maybe another homage to Baz Luhrmann's film, where the prologue is read by a TV announcer[19] – makes the text successfully partake of postmodern technological and virtual reality and discourse. Thus, Budlender – the male spectator/voyeur – falls in love with the image of a woman in bits and pieces, as her body is thus intermittently portrayed within the frame of the TV screen:

[19] "The whole film is clearly marked as postmodern spectacle, beginning and ending as a television news broadcast." *Shakespeare in Production, Romeo and Juliet*, James N. Loehlin (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 83.

> She came and went in an instant. […] It was nothing but bits and pieces of things. […] An endless jumble of body parts amid ruins, a gyrating hip, an enigmatic navel, a fossicking hand, a pointing finger […] fragments of city streets, images flaring and fading. Dissolving, detaching, floating in airtime, dwindling away into nothing. *Simunye, we are one*, the signature tune insisted (*EV* 24).
>
> She was on television again […] in a blue dress that left her shoulders bare and showed him, for the first time, the fullness of her breasts. […] He would be free to watch the planes of her face, to consider the way she was assembled, to extrapolate from the curves of her breasts to her belly, her thighs (*EV* 41).
>
> Her hands were out of sight, severed at the wrists by the bottom of the screen, but he could tell that they were moving (*EV* 44).

The courting of the woman's body fragmented into bits and pieces alludes, both in the original and in the target text, to the underside of romantic love, that is, carnality and passion. More importantly and interestingly, along the tradition of productions that translate *Romeo an Juliet* into a racial and ethnic (or postcolonial) theme,[20] Vladislavić's use of the metaphor of the woman's beloved body in bits and pieces translates social/urban divisions, with the result of exposing the political agenda of internecine partitions/apartheids and borders' vindications as it happens as instanced also with Salman Rushdie and Kiran Desai.[21] Yet, the

[20] See James N. Loehlin ed., *Shakespeare in Production, Romeo and Juliet,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 79-85.

[21] The kiss scene that is delayed by the courtship of the two young lovers, naming their body parts (i.e. hands and lips) becomes a literalised metaphor in Salman Rushdie's narration about the contested Kashmiri border and about Aziz Sinai's courtship of his future wife's body parts seen through a hole in a white bedsheet that should allow the Doctor Sahib, to diagnose and cure Naseem's ever more frequent maladies: 'stomach-ache, twisted right ankle, ingrowing toenail, a tiny cut on the lower left calf, stiff right knee, the skin flake[d] off her hands, weakness of the wristbones, constipation, fevers… So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture

body in bits and pieces, or better the list, the catalogue of the body parts of the beloved woman is an inheritance from Petrarch and Petrarchism, which echo for instance in Shakespeare's "anti-Petrarchan" *Sonnet 130* "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun", where the conventional comparison of eyes, lips, breasts, hair, cheeks, breath, voice, and feet to the most beautiful and precious things is mocked and belied.

Iris's short, serialized apparitions on television only show her face, profile, a stereotypical smile (*EV* 44), shoulders, breasts, and hardly ever her entire figure. Besides, in spite of the fact that Budlender repeatedly visits Iris, he fails to see her as a whole, but is always misled by the distortion of the exploded view and by his voyeuristic and fetishist attitude:

> Her underwear evoked her naked body, but he could not imagine it precisely, all he saw was bits and pieces of other women, the thighs of his last lover, breasts out of magazines, hips and shoulders that were ambiguously, softly angled, like her face (*EV* 30).

This postmodern obsession with a body in fragments is, however, another borrowing from Shakespeare, particularly from Mercutio's dirty speech about Rosaline (II.i. 17-21) or from the Nurse's speech about Romeo (II.v. 40-46), or even from the fa-

of Nezeem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams. […] but she was headless, because he had never seen her face…'. *Midnight's Children*, London, Picador, 1982, pp. 23, 25-26. Similarly, Kiran Desai's representation of the exploding love between the 16 years old Sai and her Maths private tutor Gyan follows the same pattern of postponement and delay by naming and measuring their body parts against a background of contest about the Nepalese border : "'Let me see your hands. They are so small." "Are they?" "Yes." He held his own out by hers. "See?" Fingers. Nails. "Hm. What long fingers. Little nails. […] Arms they measured and legs. Catching sight of her foot – "Let me see." […] her eyes […] the arch of an eyebrow…'. *The Inheritance of Loss,* London, Hamish Hamilton, 2006, pp. 114-116.

mous scene of the kiss, where the lovers similarly anatomise each other:

Iris had strange hands, too large and bony to be beautiful, he would have thought, but he was shaken by them. He felt them taking hold of him, brushing his surface roughly, picking him up, dropping him.

(*EV* 11)

Opening the questionnaire on the glass table-top and smoothing it flat with her palm, she pushed it towards him. The fingers of her right hand were spread to hold the paper flat. With the middle finger of her left hand – it struck him that she did not use her index finger – she traced along a printed line. […]
Her hands were large and long, almost rawboned, her fingernails broad and flat, and slightly hooked at the ends. They should be painted, he thought.

(*EV* 13)

He wanted to press his lips to her knuckles and taste sea-salt and lemon rind.

*(EV 27)*

He kept wanting to kiss the side of her head or slide his ink-stained fingers under her skirt. Through it all, he had the sense that he was

*Romeo.* If I profane with my
unjworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready
stand
To smooth that rough touch with a
tender kiss.
*Juliet.* Good pilgrim, you do wrong
your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims',
hands do touch
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.
*Romeo.* Have not saints lips, and holy
palmers too?
*Juliet.* Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must
use in prayer.
*Romeo.* O then, dear saint, let lips do
what hands do:
They pray: grant though, lest faith turn
to despair.
*Juliet.* Saints do not move, though grant
for prayer's sake.
*Romeo.* Then move not, while my
prayer's effect I take.
[*He kisses her*]
Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is
purg'd.
*Juliet.* Then have my lips the sin that
they have took.
*Romeo.* Sin from my lips? O trespass
sweetly urge'd
Give me my sin again.
[*He kisses her*]

performing. Not just behaving badly but *acting* badly.

(*EV* 29)

He was in a daze, watching her hands on the paper, memorizing the shapes of her fingers, the lines on her knuckles.

(*EV* 34)

*Juliet.* You kiss by th'book.

(I.v. 98-109)

*Romeo.* The brightness of her cheek
would shame those stars
As daylight doth a lamp. Her eyes in
heaven
Would thrugh the airy region stream so
bright
That birds would sing and think it were
not night.
See how she leans her cheek upon her
hand.
O that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek.

(II.ii.19-24)

In spite of the fact that Budlender can be compared to Romeo, some of whose lines he steals, he never kisses Iris, who does not reciprocate his interest and fantasies, and we only read of his thoughts in the third person through indirect speech. Thus Budlender's voyeurism is mirrored by our voyeurism as readers, who enter his mental monologue as witnesses of his repressed desire and inaction. Moreover, in Valdislavić's text the sublimation of earthly love through religious or mystic language, puns and metaphors, which are typical of a high register, is completely missing and the representation of love plunges into mere sexual desire and discourse, more typical of a low register.

As in a film (or as in a filmic adaptation, or serialized version, of Shakespare's drama), the story begins with Budlender on his fifth and final trip to Villa Toscana and then it rewinds back to a chronological order from beginning to end. This flash forward functions as a prequel and a closure to the story ('This was his fifth trip to Tuscany. It turned out to be the last' *EV* 3) and refers both to Shakespeare's plays in five acts and to the "Pro-

logue" of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the Chorus pre-announces the "death-marked love" of the protagonists. Similarly, Budlender hints at his failures. Back to his first visit to Villa Toscana, then, where Budlender is conscious of being 'like a man in a film' (*EV* 6). Later on, he refers to his clumsiness as bad acting by a bad actor ('Through it all, he had the sense that he was performing. Not just behaving badly but acting badly' *EV* 29), and when he visits the woman's bathroom he looks at himself in the mirror 'from one side and then the other, like a man in a movie, composing himself' (*EV* 29).

Budlender always sees reality as if through a filter. He is always behind a window, or watching television. Like a cameraman, he registers framed fragments of reality through repetitions (replay): he visits Iris five times, sees her on television four times, and he also serializes reality as a soap opera. Thus, everything becomes fiction, or staged reality like Villa Toscana itself, which is a staged version of a dystopian Tuscany.

Budlender does not only translate himself into a neo-Shakespearian character, but he also self-consciously compares himself to Prince Valiant (at the Gate), to Gulliver in Lilliput (the miniaturized Italy in the veld) and to Alice in Wonderland (the Gate and Iris's apartment, *EV* 12). By profession Budlender is a clerk ('He had the mind of a clerk' *EV* 26), at the Statistical Services of the Development Bank, his work being to help redraft the questionnaires for the national census. He has developed a personal obsession with statistics – he compulsively counts things ('Cars for men, cars for women. Rivers of drivers. He stopped counting' *EV* 15-16), he reduces or groups facts into percentages and taxonomies (*EV* 4, 9), and he is always fidgeting with his pocket calculator (*EV* 10). All this also makes a neo-Thomas Gradgrind of him, as if out of Dickens's *Hard Times*, and a kind of wandering salesman (Romeo's name also means "roaming, wandering"), as if out of Arthur Miller's play ('Driving, always driving' *EV* 10), always alone and exiled.

However, Shakespeare's text is evidently dis-placed and removed to this new suburban context of post-apartheid South African architecture, urban planning and real estate policy. After all Baz Luhrmann's movie *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* has shown that Shakespeare can be moved successfully to any contemporary sub-urban scenario. Probably, the new fashion and trend in South Africa "to sell" Italy as a surrogate and as a theme park is the pre-text which triggered the author's imagination towards the adaptation of Shakespeare's prototypical tragic romance in Johannesburg.

The "wall as symbol" has probably inspired Vladislavić. 'With love's light wings did I o'perch these walls, / For stony limits cannot hold love out,' (II.ii 66-67) says Romeo, who ends up banished and exiled from Verona. "The Wall" is a construct that a character in one of Vladislavić's previous short stories builds, brick by brick, in order to defend his property during the years of apartheid.[22] A wall, a gate and a guard prevent Budlender to enter Villa Toscana. All these security systems, which are so common in gated communities all over the world, in South Africa are encrusted with – and clustered round – a completely different symbolism, which in such structures inevitably allows us to retrace a continuum with – and a legacy of – the past.

Villa Toscana can be defined as a utopia (as part of the democratic post-apartheid urban experience), turned into a dystopia (where capital and class barriers replace colour barriers). These gated communities have become very popular in South Africa nowadays – as they are in many global cities of the South and of the East (South America, Russia, China) – and they proliferate on the outskirts of big cities like Johannesburg, while two new "Villa

[22] Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić eds., "Journal of a Wall", *Missing Persons,* Cape Town, David Philip, 1989; "The Great Wall of Jeff", *blank_Architecture, apartheid and after,* Rotterdam, NAi Publishers, 1998, p. 311.

Toscana" residential developments have recently been advertised also in Durban.[23]

Quite remarkably, between 2002 and 2006 a bunch of texts, both fictions and non-fictions, have been published on new developments in Johannebsurg, maybe as autonomous flourishings, maybe as a response to the *Sunday Times*'s sponsorship of a new literary award – *Bessie Head Non-Fiction Fellowship Award* – aimed at promoting non-fiction writing in South Africa.[24] Lindsay Bremner won the Award, and her work is worth comparing with Vladislavić's novel, for they share several descriptions of the edge city:

> The boundaries of Johannesburg are drifting away, sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again. At its edges, where the city fades momentarily into the veld, unimaginable new atmospheres evolve.
>
> (*EV* 6)

> In an arc stretching around the northern edge of Johannesburg lies a tiara of sparkling outer cities that stand at the new frontier of urban life.
>
> (Bremner 2004, 30)

[23] Ads in a local newspaper read as follows: "BALLITOThe Tuscan Villas are nestled in the beautiful Umhlali Golf Estate Ballito on the North Coast, Kwa-Zulu Natal. (High security, driving range. Practise putting greens, tennis and squash courts. Bowling greens, swimming pools. Luxurious Club House). Two to Three bedroom villas from R 1.5 million to R 2.85 million. All villas have a double garage, ducted aircon, alarm system, courtyard and garden…."; "BOTANIC GARDENS sought after Tuscany: Neat, secure flat in well run complex. Open Balcony, pool, 24 hours security. R 420,000…". (Kindly signalled by Prof. Johan Jacobs, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Department of English).

[24] In 2002 Lindsay Bremner published 5 essays on Johannesburg on the *Sunday Times*, now in L. Bremner, *Johannesburg. One City Colliding Worlds,* Johannesburg, STE Publishers, 2004, later on, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal published similar articles on a special issue of the review *Public Culture* 16:3, (2004), in the same year Ivan Vladislavić published *The Exploded View,* Johannesburg, Random House, and *Portrait with Keys. The City of Johannesburg Unlocked,* London, Portobello Books, 2006. Achille Mbembe's and Sarah Nuttal's articles became a volume: *Johannesburg the Elusive Metropolis,* Durham, Duke University Press, 2008.

About Bremner's views, the Cameroonian sociologist Achille Mbembe writes that these 'recent works on the edge city and the suburbs may signal new readings of the city' (2008: 14). Bremner goes on to analyse social changes:

> Middleclass residents had secured themselves behind electric fences, guardhouse and patrols. Townships had virtually disappeared from view. The casino economy had taken hold. The city had become more fragmented, more polarized and more diverse than ever before (2004: 19, *my emphasis*).

Villa Toscana is precisely inscribed within these two polarities. On the one hand it is the utopian dream of the middle class: 'the Johannesburg with which most people identify and to which they aspire are the homogeneous shopping malls or "Tuscan" villas which proliferate in the northern suburbs' (Bremner 2004, 62), on the other, it is the product of the same urban planners who have designed places and sites like Montecasino in the North of Johannesburg:

> Montecasino, the Tuscan gambling citadel in the northern suburbs, is an ungainly sprawl from the air. Inside, its authentically fake ornamental landscape wraps us in a fun-filled, never-ending twilight utopia, where the pigeons don't shit and the roofs cast shadows on the sky.
> This gamblers' paradise was built in the late 1990s by Sogo Sun, Southern Sun's gaming division, backed by South African Breweries. Ken Rosevear […] also knew that there was no other casino anywhere in the world in Tuscan theme and thought its "earthy feel" would appeal to South Africans. […] Montecasino is rated one of the top 10 casinos in the world, outstripping its South African counterparts by far. And Rosevear still flies in regularly to advise on changes to the underwear hanging in its streets and to ensure that the flags draped in Piazza Duomo follow the fortunes of the teams in the Italian soccer league. With people like Rosevear

> attending to the details of the simulation, our Tuscany is arguably preferable to the real thing (Bremner 2004, 130).

Achille Mbembe calls Montecasino one of the 'new public theatres of late capitalism', 'designed to look like a Tuscan village and named after Monte Cassino, the famous Benedictine monastery destroyed by the German and Allied bombs in World War II'. 'Like other casinos in South Africa, the mark of the entire complex is fakery' (Mbembe 2008, 56-57). The peculiarity of Johannesburg's African modernity is the eclectic intersection of – and affiliation to – both European (Mediterranean Tuscany) and North American (Las Vegas) models.

On the basis of both Jean Baudrillard's theory of "simulacra and simulation"[25] and of Marc Augé's theory of "non-places" subsequently elaborated by others [26] with reference to this type of theme park where the authentically fake and the simulation replace at surface level the missing original, we can say, nevertheless, that this architectural and urban rhetoric underpins Villa Toscana: 'the security enclaves, the burgeoning 'Tuscan' landscape of the northern suburbs (*EV* 20)' as Bremner defines it. The main features of these suburbs are high concrete walls – sometimes with electrified barbed wire on top – surrounding the neighbourhood and running along major highways, gates with a security guard to whom visitors must declare their name and vehicle licence plate number to be double-checked by a phone call to the residents eventually authorizing them to enter. Inside the

[25] Suffice here to quote his definition of the world's most famous theme park: "Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra" Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Michigan: The University if Michigan Press, 1999, p. 12.

[26] "The urbanism of Disneyland is precisely the urbanism of universal equivalence. In this new city, the idea of distinct places is dispersed into a sea of universal placelessness as everyplace becomes destination and any destination can be anyplace." Michael Sorkin, "See you in Disneyland", Sorkin ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space,* New Yok, Hill and Wang, 1992, p. 217.

walls, they feature semidetached villas in pastel colours, all alike, giving on to Italian fake piazzas, benches, lampposts, winding cobbled roads named either "Via Veneto" or "Piazza de Siena", or "Monte Aperto" (*EV* 11):

> Villa Toscana lies on a sloping ridge beside the freeway, a little prefabricated Italy in the veld […] Passing by on the N3, Budlender fancied that he could see Iris at one of the windows in Villa Toscana, watching for him.
>
> (*EV* 3)

> A strange sensation had come over him when he first drew up at the gates of Villa Toscana, a dreamlike blend of familiarity and displacement.
>
> (*EV* 6)

> The architect had given the entrance the medieval treatment. […] the wooden gates where heavy and dark, and studded with bolts and hinges, there were iron grilles in drystone walls. A security man gazed at him through an embrasure in a fortified guardhouse.
>
> *(EV 7)*

> Midrand is the uncontested jewel in this outer-city crown. Midrand remains geographically and economically divided, the fault line being the concrete wall of the N1.
>
> (Bremner 2004, 31-33).

> Kyalami Estates is ringed by a two-meter high, electricity topped, R7,5 million perimeter wall, with digital access control, computer-based armed reaction and 11 patrol zones. But once past this bristling electromagnetic field, the idea abruptly changes from keeping the riff-raff out to making like Club Med. […] Kyalami Estates is, whether we like it or not, the model of urban living our society most aspires to for now and the foreseeable future.
>
> (Bremner 2004, 48)

Valdislavić and Bremner also give us an ironic, albeit sadly realistic, view of how these presumed "Tuscans" (both white and black *nouveaux riches*) live inside their enclaves:

People coming home from work, cheerful Tuscans, rudely healthy and well dressed, banging the doors of their cars, fetching briefcases and grocery packets from their boots, pressing the remote control devices that switched on the alarms of their obedient recreational vehicles.

(*EV* 32)

On the edge, the colour of one's money rapidly replaces skin colour as the currency of showy success. Acquisitiveness – 4x4 vehicles, teeny-weeny cell phones, gym-toned bodies, Diesel, Kookai, gold-plated taps, marble floors, Play Stations 2s – goes hand in hand with that other must-have suburban attitude: lack of curiosity about everyone else.

(Bremner 2004, 46)

Bremner's assumption concerning the lack of curiosity about anyone else is exactly the dominant note in Vladislavić's prose, where individualism reigns and utter lack of communication causes the failure of Budlender's and Iris's romance.

Johannesburg itself in the four sections of Vladislavić's novel appears as a fragmented city, composed of islands connected to- or disconnected from- one another through huge highways. This fragmentation is shown in the text through the incongruity of "a squatter camp" that 'had sprung up in the last year on the open veld between this road and the freeway, directly opposite the new housing scheme. He had no idea what either place was called, [he] drew no distinction between the formal and the informal' (*EV* 20). Similarly, Johannesburg is either the empty, anonymous city of the suburbs, or the city peopled by street vendors and improvised pedestrian jugglers and flea markets everywhere, selling African exotica of dubious aesthetic and artistic value. Or it is the Johannesburg of the thousand and one immigrants, black immigrants from all over Africa, whom Budlender, the statistician, can neither count ('Could the aliens have outstripped the indigenous? Was it possible? There were no reliable statistics' *EV* 5) nor truly recognize from their facial features (""Small ears?" "That's what I said. Little ears, flat against the skull […] it seemed to him that there were Nigerians everywhere. He had started to see Mozam-

bicans too, and Somalis. It was the opposite of the old stereotype: they all looked different to him'" *EV* 5). Of these new African immigrants he cannot even recognize the idioms ('Zulu? Sotho? […] For all he knew, the fellow might be speaking Igbo. *EV* 24).' Budlender should be familiar with these two main South African language groups, yet this failure of his ear – (significantly, he often turns down the volume of his TV set, transforming Iris into a dumb object of his gaze) – lays in distinguishing among other African idioms.

Vladislavić has presented us with a typical middle-class man, a prematurely senile statistician of thirty-seven, who observes reality through his preconceptions and prejudices, who thinks of New York when he imagines himself in a city, who falls in love with a TV starlet whom he transforms into a princess imprisoned in her medieval guarded citadel, into a Juliet, into a dead (framed) object of desire, according to the dominant and traditional male chauvinist views. He is the heir of apartheid and segregation, insofar as he still looks to black people as to foreigners, and becomes the unwilling witness of a changing, multicultural South Africa. The most oblique reference to change being the surreal image he saw at night of a naked man, inside a big lorry tyre, rolling down the street, like a snail in its house, thus erasing the image of the "necklace practice" of the years of apartheid. The vendor with a puppet bird, the beggar tap dancing with a "please drive carefully" message handwritten on a board, the man in the tyre, the overloaded suspect taxi he overtakes, the squatter camps and the new European/Mediterranean cocoon-islands are all snapshots of this new South Africa. Only they do not connect, like floating islands of diversity where difference persists in the form of complete otherness.

Vladislavić's novel as a whole manages to realistically represent Johannesburg as a global and variegated city of the South, very

much like similar global cities of the North,[27] but also modern in a real African way. "Villa Toscana", the first section of the novel, however, seems to reproduce the ubiquitous preoccupation in the literature on Johannesburg: 'the rise, fall, and reconstruction of the segregated city'. This rhetoric was already present in previous works by the author, particularly in *blank_Architecture, apartheid and after* as Achille Mbembe claims:

> In many instances, the trope of a city "under siege" proves to be simply a juxtaposition of exclusive suburban enclaves, closed spaces, and simulated histories undergirded by a fantasy urbanism and old lifestyle (Mbembe 2008, 14).

In particular, the "*Fort ende Thuijn*" logic – literally "Fort and garden" – of the first settlement by the Dutch East India Company at the Cape was planned in 1649 and was then realized in 1652 by Ian Van Riebeeck. The opening essay in Judin's and Vladislavić's text is dedicated to the intrinsic meaning of this system 'enclosing the fields and meadows of the colonists with a dense hawthorn hedge. […] Shelter, enclosure, keeping together, shutting out, protecting, defending, establishing a presence and ensuring its survival […] images encapsulating much of what was to be attempted in South Africa by white settlers over the following three centuries and more' (Judin, Vladislavić 1998: 34).[28]

Villa Toscana, as an enclosure, perfectly replaces the Capulets's "*feudo*" as well as the colonial and apartheid "*Fort ende Thuijn*" system. Conversely, however it is embedded within the larger scale of the big multifaceted metropolis that is today's Jo-

[27] "After all, until very recently, Johannesburg described itself as the largest and most modern European city in Africa" (Mbembe 2008, 18).

[28] "Van Riebeck used slave labour to plant a thick hedge of bramble and indigenous bitter almond, interspersed with fortified posts, to separate land forcibly occupied by the company from the now excluded and dispossessed Khoikhoi" (Loomba 1998, 205).

hannesburg. In this way Vladislavić has produced a piece of writing that at surface level seems a postmodern, ludic, irreverent adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Yet, at a deeper level, trying to disentangle all the complex interwoven metadiscoursive pathways, it appears to be a convincing indigenized and post-apartheid version of Shakespeare. Iris as Juliet and Budlender as exiled Romeo are plausible characters set against the background of an enclave that is the mirror of other such gated communities in the world, and that is rooted at the same time in the South African past and present history of urban development:

> A socioeconomic fragmentation is also visible in the built environment of the city: a geography of fortifications and enclosures; increasing demand for special and social insulation; and reliance on technologies of security, control, and surveillance (Mbembe, 2008, 23).

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*Chapter 3*

# MARLENE CREATES'S ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS AS LAND ARTIST, PHOTOGRAPHER AND POET[29]

Marlene Creates is an environmental artist, a photographer and a poet. Her main artistic research consists in personally exploring, capturing and translating into various artistic languages the relationship between human experience and the land, particularly her beloved Newfoundland. Without idealizing Nature as such, Marlene Creates's ecocritical aesthetics is well-aware that neither nature nor any landscape is originally pure and that – as is confirmed by Human Geography, human beings – even prehistoric or ancient presences – have left their marks on the terrain, whether visible or not, and therefore they have contributed to the modification and change of the environment.

Marlene Creates's works and installations are interesting because they encompass the mineral, the vegetal, the animal and the human world, or, better, the interrelation between all these elements without necessarily privileging any of them.[30] Among her

[29] This chapter has been written thanks to an ongoing dialogue with the artist, to whom I am thankful for her generosity, and for allowing the reproduction of her poems. See her web-site: http://www.marlenecreates.ca. Notes to the poems have been added here in order to show the borrowings from Newfoundland vernacular.

[30] Marlene Creates seems to share the principles of deep ecology: "Deep ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the *ecosphere*, but even toward all identifiable *entities* or *forms* in the ecospheres. Thus, this attitude is intended to extend, for example, to such entities (or forms) as rivers, landscapes, and even species and social systems con-

poetic statements, two are particularly relevant: her predilection for minimalism, that is, the small scale, the typical and not the exception;[31] and her predisposition to a certain "knowledge in the negative", as in photography, that is the consciousness of the gnoseologic limits of any artistic gesture.

What strikes us the most is Marlene Creates's relationship with the region of her Boreal Poetry Garden – the six acres (2.3 hectares) of Boreal Forest where she lives and works in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland. First of all, at the very "Introduction" to her internet project, *A Virtual Walk of The Boreal Poetry Garden,* she stresses "the slightness of her artistic gesture" and her consciousness that "often words are the only means to convey the fleeting phenomena her camera cannot capture".

Some of her "site-specific poems" are very short, like haikus.[32] There, a single image gains prominence, as in the poem "Will I":

> Will I
> trim off this branch
> jutting in the new path?
> The next pass a yellow leaf brushes
> my lips.

Here, "next" is the only temporal adverb that marks the passing of time, the sequence in the genesis of the poem. In two

sidered in their own right. Gorge Sessions (ed.), *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, Boston, Shambhala,1995, p. 270.

31 "There is a long tradition of landscape art. The landscape which is important to me, though, is not scenery or far-distant views, but rather what happens on the scale where even a stone or single wave can make a difference. That is enough for me." Artist's statement, *Paper, Stones and Water* (1981), a series of 59 photo/ landworks. medium: 53 azo dye (cibachrome) photographic colour prints and 6 black and white photographic works completed between 1979-1985.

32 "Many of the short poems are in the cinquain form (with the syllable count being 2,4,6,8,2), which is my favourite form." (M. Creates, private correspondence). See also Tara Bradbury, "Garden poem," *The Telegram*, St. John's, July 15, 2011: tbradbury@thetelegram.com; www.twitter.com/tara_bradbury.

steps, the question raised in the first part receives a silent, gentle and negative answer in the second part, visually marked by a still shot of a single, bright yellow leaf in the foreground.

Yet, in spite of the apparent simplicity of her poetic message, her poetry immediately presents itself as rooted in archaic forms of oral verse, which are native characteristics, so to speak, of poetry as a genre since ancient times and almost universally. While the virtual walk, through her website, might involve only the poet herself and one or more viewers, the on-site walks include an audience following her through the forest, sometimes even at night with flashlights. Thus, the poems are read aloud (and sometimes explained), always in the precise spot that inspired them, and words are mirrored by the real referents they are dedicated to. This poetic tour also involves a certain didactic process of environmental education, where the artist manages to convey by example her ethical and aesthetic stands. Her writing is a form of bio-graphy, for she writes about her position in Nature, she formulates new meanings in contemporary consciousness about the need to salvage bio-diversity and specific environments – even those far away from metropolitan or political and financial centres – and updates our knowledge of life as *bios* as well as *graphein* – that is, as a critical inscription of our presence in the world.

The regionalism, or better, Marlene Creates's knowledge of Newfoundland is somehow comparable to Emily Carr's attachment to- and knowledge of- the Canadian West Coast. This site-specificity of her poems is particularly evident in a short piece related to the progression from wood to flowers:

> Deadfalls to chainsaw;
> logs to fire and warm feet;
> ashes to flowers.

In this case, Marlene Creates explains to her audience that the wildflowers she is pointing at are fireweed blooming in the summer in a vivid pink explosion that creates the connection with

fire.[33] Heard in winter, for example, the short and imagist poem is quite evocative of a memory of the summer when the fireweed blooms.

Besides being performed, or being oral and visual – and possibly aromatic, when facing flowers and grass, or chopped wood – Marlene Creates's sensorial poems are also polyphonic, for her voice, while reading and reciting, is accompanied by bird calls, the ambient noises of the forest, and the flowing of water, or the rattling of rain, as in the following examples:

> White-throated sparrows call;
> thud! a yaffle[34] of white birch
> dropped on the woodpile.
>
> Blue gap in running
> clouds, camera poised,
> sparkling waterfall.
>
> The storm
> began with one
> apple remaining on the tree;
> a chickadee gripped a twig in
> the gusts.
>
> Quiet,
> as the lull when
> the black-backed woodpecker
> stops knocking overhead in the
> crunnick[35] grove.

[33] The fireweed also gets its name from the fact that it often thrives in areas that have been affected by forest fires. (M. Creates, private correspondence).

[34] According to the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, "a yaffle" is defined as "an armful (of dried and salted cod-fish, kindling, etc.); a load."

[35] According to the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, "crunnicks" are old twisted dead trees, with the bark all gone, weathered and turned white; and the dry crooked sticks of such trees.

Pink wild
rose petals poised
downstream on the mossy
edge for two days; then a record
rainstorm.

The closing poem in *A Virtual Walk of The Boreal Poetry Garden* is a poem dedicated entirely to sounds: the sounds of water in different seasons and under different weather conditions, which the poet wishes she could transcribe, and the twitters and chirps she hears in the forest, which have been transcribed by writers of field guides:

"All the sounds"

The Blast Hole Pond River fills the air
with all the sounds that water can make
when it crashes in torrents with a fall hurricane,
and flobbers[36] beneath muffling ice-rind[37] and snow,
as it drips and it sishes[38] through spring,
then swirls in the sun around leaf-shadowed boulders.

I wish I could transcribe the river's repertoire
like the field guide that renders
the pattern and pitch of the twitters and
chirps that I've heard in these woods.

[36] According to the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, to lap against; to flow against; to wash or splash over.
[37] According to the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, there is slush, sludge, ice rind, pancake ice, brash, pack ice, northern slob. Arctic slob, string ice. Or, young ice. Newly-formed level ice generally in the transition stage of development from ice-rind, or pancake ice to winter ice; thickness from 2 inches to 6 inches, as a rule impassable and unsafe for travel either by man or dogs, or in the case of aircraft for ski or wheel landings. Ibid. Young shore ice.
[38] According to the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, of the surface of a body of water, to form a thin layer of ice.

*wick wick wick wick wick* (northern flicker)
*per-chick-o-ree* (goldfinch)
*yank-yank, yank-yank-yank-yank* (red-breasted nuthatch)
*zi-zi-zi-zi-zi-ZI-ZI-ZI-ZI-ZI-zi-zi-zi-zi-zi* (blackpoll warbler)
*chut-chut-chut-chut* (redpoll)
*chee-chee-chee, chip-chip-chip-chew-chew-chew* (northern water-thrush)
*queedle-queedle, queedle-queedle* (blue jay)
*chick—che—day—day* (boreal chickadee)
*sweet sweet Canada, Canada, Canada* (white-throated sparrow)
*cheer-up, cheerily, cheer-up, cheerily* (robin)

Thus, through a series of onomatopoeic sounds, she tries to render the varieties of bird calls, with the song of the White-throated Sparrow being prominent: *sweet sweet Canada, Canada, Canada.*

The transcription referring to Canada is not only a chant celebrating the nation but it works as a geographical, or almost cartographic, reference to locate the bird whose song most typifies, to some, the boreal forest.[39] At the end of the sonic and acustic performance, the poet was asked by someone in her audience to explain which bird says *queedle-queedle* and she answered that it is one of the calls of the Blue Jay.

Other poems show how images and words are absolutely complementary to recording and reporting – that is to capturing and to translating – of a specific experience in a precise spot of land:

On the ladder,
sawing off dead branches;
long grass on a rocky ledge.

Coming upon the rockface
for the first time — it is
something unto itself,
eerie, numinous.

[39] In the USA, interestingly, the White-throated Sparrow's song has been transcribed as *Poor Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody.* (M. Creates, private correspondence).

Stillness,
like the moment
after the moose bolted,
clipped the turn: hoofbeats in the
footpath.

Rocks moved to grow potatoes
so many years ago, moss.

The poems are sensorial and descriptive – I would say realistic – in both the virtual walk and the *in situ* walks. The poet is physically and emotionally present, moving around, didactically showing and pointing. The personal is not excluded from these poems either, – it emerges as a conscious positional relation in each one and, in the example below, as the poet is watching her nephew depart with sadness:

Plane overhead
taking my young nephew
home with jars of jam;
at my feet
the plucked blueberry bush.

This project is relevant for different reasons. First of all the Boreal Forest becomes a community space, a shared place, not the privileged romantic site where the poet alone contemplates Nature. Second, in her poems Marlene Creates draws a map of a particular patch of Boreal Forest that has its own recognisable and site-specific landmarks, for instance, the Rockface. Third, her written poems give us hints also of the past life in the Forest, where animals and earlier settlers have lived and modified the environment, so that her poems transcend the (idyllic) here-and-now of their genesis and inspiration or the (pragmatic and referential) here-and-now of their performed recital. Thus, in one of the opening poems of the internet project, Marlene Creates

speaks not only of what we can see but also of what we cannot see or wish we could see– with the poet:

> "The rattling brook path"
>
> To look at it now,
> even if you could see
> beneath the snowdrifts to the worn ground
> between the bunchberries, starflowers,
> creeping snowberry, moss,
> knees of tree roots and
> knuckles of rocks
> hundreds of millions of years old,
>
> still, you wouldn't see
> the moose, the musicians,
> the sailors, the curators,
> the neighbours, the nephew,
> the snowshoe hares,
> the writers, the father, the artists,
> the geologist, the anthropologist,
> the brother, the mother,
> the visitors from Victoria, Tasmania,
> Kentucky and Kippens,
> the niece, nor the naked boy running
> after a dip in the rattling brook.
>
> What I wish I could see:
> livyers[40] from the cove
> years ago
> hauling water up the path
> from the brook to the bawn,[41]

[40] According to the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, "livyers" are inhabitants, residents, permanent settlers.
[41] According to the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, a "bawn" is grassy land or a meadow near a house or settlement.

where willow and fireweed
have since taken root in the furrows
of their vegetable gardens.

Her "knowledge in the negative" is particularly evident in this poem, her piercing look at what we cannot see through, behind Nature; namely, the culture that has contributed to change it and shape it as it is now. The anthropomorphism of Nature is also a peculiar feature in these poems.

Marlene Creates has also worked on artistic projects in England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, the Canadian Arctic, Labrador, and every province of Canada. For instance, she placed white paper across a pair of standing stones in an ancient stone circle to juxtapose "the enormous geological and historical past" (stones) and her volatile gesture (a strip of white paper), as she claims when referring to that experience: "With the paper I was able to make a simple gesture which left no permanent mark yet had a great impact on the landscape."[42] And, regarding a cairn she built in 1982, she said, "This is a sculpture of duration, not permanence."[43]

[42] Artist's statement, *Paper, Stones and Water* (1979-1985), 1981.

[43] Artist's statement, *Cairn: Shore Stone and Mountain Stone, St. John's, Newfoundland 1982*. Commissioned by the Art Gallery of Memorial University in conjunction with the solo exhibition *On Site*, 1982.

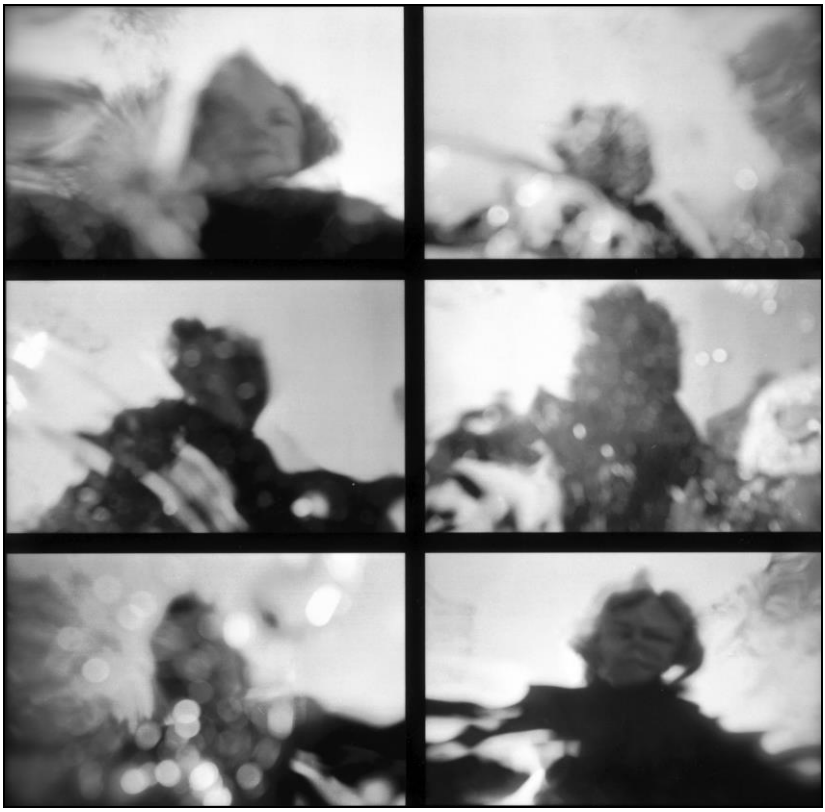
If Keats in his *Ode on A Grecian Urn* was celebrating the eternal role of art and beauty, here Marlene Creates, as land artist, is aware that her artistic artefact – she rightly speaks of gesture – is far more fragile and predictably not everlasting. About her aesthetic views she claims:

> Still, several feet of white paper are not the art work. The hill, the stones, the grass, the wind, the rain, the tide are all a part. So the art work is not all finished – there are many parts still there. For me the paper acts as the crossroad for the gap between the real and the possible. What happens in the real world changes my original idea. This is what I like, the dynamic moment when I discover that the wind or rain is not an obstacle but an important event.
> I have found, though, that if I manipulate any of them, the interference is obvious. The kind of order I impose is unlikely to occur naturally. But the imposition is slight. The next high tide will disturb my arrangement and re-organize the elements again. Nature is never finished.[44]

The same sense of precariousness is evident in another of Marlene Creates's artworks: *Water Flowing to the Sea Captured at the Speed of Light*, *Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland 2002-2003*. In this case the aim of the project is to present "the conjunction of two transitory, fleeting entities – flowing water and the impermanence of our human presence."[45] Specifically, the photographer, not satisfied with simply taking a series of seasonal pictures of the small river running through her property (and part of the landscape of the *The Boreal Poetry Garden* project), captured her own presence by using an underwater camera:

[44] Marlene Creates, *Landworks 1979-1991*, with an essay by Susan Gibson Garvey, (English, with French translation), Memorial University Art Gallery, St. John's, 1993.

[45] Artist's statement, *Water Flowing to the Sea Captured at the Speed of Light, Blast Hole Pond River, Newfoundland 2002-2003*.



So I began to take photographs with an underwater camera that I held under the flowing stream and turned towards myself. These photographs are based on optics and positions – destabilizing the optics of conventional photography, and inverting the position of the photographer.

The water moving directly over the camera lens blurs and distorts my image, at times even obscures it completely. These serendipitous wavering effects express my sense of temporality, evanescence, and mortality.[46]

[46] *Ibid.*

Similarly, "human impermanence" is there, where the artist took photographs of the impression left by her body on various kinds of vegetation where she spent the night while travelling around Newfoundland and creating the series *Sleeping Places*, Newfoundland 1982:

> One time there was a gale of wind which kept me awake all night. In the morning the landowner was passing by and, seeing me photographing the ground where I had been, said, 'You're not going to see the wind.'[47]

The profound knowledge of Nature that rural people have frequently helps Marlene Creates to understand the limits of her

[47] *Sleeping Places,* Newfoundland 1982. medium: a sequence of 25 black & white photographic prints, selenium-toned silver prints *dimensions:* image size each 10 ½ x 15 ½ inches (27 x 39 cm); framed 20 x 24 inches (51 x 61 cm). installed dimensions*:* 8 feet 6 inches high (from floor) x 14 feet 4 inches wide (259 x 437 cm). collection**:** The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's.

art. Her camera can capture the grass bent by the weight of her prone body, leaving a visible imprint, but the wind that howled all night remains invisible. "The land has a memory,"[48] says Marlene Creates – which the camera can capture, although it is another sign of duration and not of permanence. This is a sign of Nature's hospitality and acceptance of the human presence, but also of Nature's indifference to human destiny.

Another meaningful example of an encounter with rural people's knowledge of Nature occurs during another project completed by the artist while travelling around the island of Newfoundland: *Notes on a Journey Encircling the Island of Newfoundland*, 1982.

She gathered one stone on each day of her journey, later arranging them into a circle for display. While working on this project, she meets a local man:

[48] *Ibid.*

> One time I was struggling along with one of the stones, indeed it was the very last stone, and a passing car stopped. The man said, 'You'll never carry away Newfoundland. It's all rocks, but you can't carry it away.'[49]

The sense of possession and belonging which is implicit in this teasing jest may also hide a concern for preserving the ecosystem exactly as it is, without moving even a single stone. Meanwhile, this claim also hides an artistic and aesthetic pessimism, hinting at the impossibility for art to really and completely make manifest the intrinsic secrets of the beauty of Newfoundland as a special place. "You can't carry away Newfoundland" also means that you cannot translate it into art, nor transfer it into a museum. But we know that the circle of stones is and is not Newfoundland; it's an artistic interpretation of the reality of the place.

Thus, what I called "knowledge in the negative", earlier on, seems to be the dominant note in Marlene Creates's poetics as an eco-artist, working with stones, water, grass and wood, as a photographer, experimenting with her camera in black and white and in colour, and as a poet, translating all this into a lyric, visual and multi-media and multi-tasking language.

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[49] Artist's statement, *Notes on a Journey Encircling the Island of Newfoundland*, 1982. medium: 49 stones and framed list of place names; dimensions: stones, 18 feet diameter (5 m); list of place names, 36 inches high x 24 inches wide (91 x 61 cm); collection: The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland.

*Appendix to chapter 3*

# QUESTIONING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES. AN INTERVIEW WITH MARLENE CREATES

**C.C.** *What is the Boreal Forest to you?*

**M.C.** 'Boreal' means 'northern', as in aurora borealis, the northern lights. The word is derived from the Greek god of the north wind, Boreas.

The boreal forest is described as "the largest ecosystem on Earth." About one third of the world's vegetation is boreal. It's a swath around the crown of the planet, covering 12 million square kilometres – about 3 billion acres – across Canada, Alaska, Scandinavia, Russia, northern China and Japan.

The boreal forest is mainly coniferous trees, particularly larch, spruce and fir, as well as deciduous shrubs and trees like alders, willow, poplar, and birch; and there is a multitude of mosses, lichens and wildflowers. I've found over 40 different kinds of wildflowers just in the little patch of boreal forest where I live. Water in many forms is also a major feature of the boreal forest: in rivers, ponds, lakes, brooks and bogs.

Canada's boreal forest stretches right across the country from the Yukon to Newfoundland & Labrador. It measures about 5 million square kilometres – about 1.4 billion acres. So Canada has almost half the world's boreal forest. It is home to hundreds of First Nations communities, as well as habitat for wildlife, including black bear, lynx, moose, wolf, caribou, snowshoe hare, and over 300 bird species.

In the province of Newfoundland & Labrador, we seem to be largely oriented to the coast. But the boreal forest is our land base – it's the ecological zone in which we live.

I love the boreal forest for all the reasons above, for its distinct seasons, and for its abundance of textures, shapes, colours, aromas and sounds. Also, its wood supplies my heat in the winter!

**C.C.** *In your presentation you refer to the local names and the vernacular language of Newfoundland. Can you explain your relationship to the local vernacular and can you please give a few examples?*

**M.C.** In both my poems and my everyday speech, I try to use local terms for phenomena such as landforms, weather, native plants and trees. The Newfoundland dialect is an abiding inspiration for me, partly because some of these words would have been in the mouths of my ancestors. And, I find they fulfil a beautiful sonic relationship with this landscape.

Newfoundland vernacular is not slang; it's a dialect of English in its own right. Some Old English words from 17th century Wessex survived in Newfoundland after disappearing in England. Some of the other linguistic groups that settled Newfoundland & Labrador include Scots Gaelic, Welsh, Norman and Breton French, Portuguese, Basque, and Spanish. And the province has been inhabited for over eight thousand years by a succession of First Nations people. So there are words from many linguistic groups in the local vocabulary. And many new words arose because of the particular circumstances the settlers found here. For example, there are many words for different conditions of ice: lolly, ballicatter, clumper, quarr, sish ice, slob ice, glim, silver thaw, ice-candle. These words are boreal poetry to me.[1]

[1] There are some examples of Newfoundland terms on this page of my website: http://www.marlenecreates.ca/works/2005boreal.html
The complete Dictionary of Newfoundland English (a very scholarly publication) is online:

**C.C.** *Are the poems from The Boreal Poetry Garden written on the spot, or are they the result of various visits in various seasons? And do they change over time?*

**M.C.** The idea for a poem usually occurs "on the spot", and I try to find some words right away for my experience or what I've perceived. But then I work on the poem for quite a long time afterwards before it's finished. There is a fragment of a sentence in an essay by Don McKay that means a lot to me: "...astonishment precedes, and provokes, poetry." Many of my poems come from moments of astonishment that I've had here in the forest.

As for the poems changing, I can only think of one example where I changed the season in a poem to match the time of year when I was reading it out loud on one of the poetry walks (the phenomena in question was equally true in the summer as in the winter). Otherwise, I don't change them over time.

**C.C.** *When you work with your camera, what kind of research are you doing? And when you work with words - you say sometimes the two means are complementary - what other kind of research are you pursuing?*

**M.C.** I use my camera as a way to pay attention to the world and to register its astonishing "there-ness". I use words when I want to register what cannot be photographed – fleeting phenomena, like sounds, for example, and things I perceive through my senses other than sight. Most of my theoretical and studio research is about the ecology of the boreal forest – even just simply learning to identify the wildflowers, trees, shrubs, birds, lichens, moss, etc. I also try to keep abreast of contemporary Canadian photography, poetry, cultural geography and theories of "place" and its representation.

http://www.heritage.nf.ca/dictionary/.

Another of my ongoing research projects is Larch, Spruce, Fir, Birch, Hand, Blast Hole Pond Road.[2] In this project, I'm trying to pay attention to the trees in this patch of forest so that I can individuate some of them from amongst the thousands that are here. In fact, I would say that the essential part of my work has been, and still is, simply paying attention. My works are not acts of the imagination. They come from being receptive to whatever is there. It's a combination of both fierce concentration and letting go, in order to notice the things that emerge miraculously from regions beyond one's control.

**C.C.** *The next thing I am interested in is your insistence on the fact that there is always something you cannot capture, as in the rural people you met who said that you cannot take Newfoundland away or you cannot capture the wind or that a work of art is a work of duration not permanence. I find this consciousness about limits interesting....*

**M.C.** I'm very aware of the fleeting nature of existence. As I've said, "The place I inhabit is both wondrous and constantly changing, which, I know, entails loss. My cosmology, I suspect, is basically elegiac."

[2] See http://www.marlenecreates.ca/works/2007larch.html.

*Chapter 4*

# FROM RAVINES TO HAND-MADE GARDENS IN SOME TORONTONIAN NARRATIVES

Guerrilla gardening and militant ecology might be the keywords to introduce the analysis of the new forms of gardening explored by two major contemporary Canadian writers: Anne Michaels and Margaret Atwood. Indeed, their earlier works, particularly their novels set in Toronto, show the ravines – those peculiar ecosystems within the very metropolitan and downtown area of Toronto – as iconic sites. Yet, in their latest novels both Michaels and Atwood have moved to a new frontier, an "avant-garde-like" representation of nature: mainly, in-house gardening within an urban environment. Respectively, in Anne Michaels's *The Winter Vault* (2009) and in Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009), self-made strategies of transplantation as well as in-house gardening, and roof-top gardens, as a way to salvage vegetal diversity, are presented as new forms of eco-consciousness.

To begin with, Anne Michaels's *début* novel *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) – characterized as it is by a lyrical prose style and metaphoric language which counterbalance the sad and nostalgic story of a Polish refugee from Nazi Europe – soon aligns itself to classical Torontonian narratives that slip down into the ravines, and seems to pay homage to Margaret Atwood as an inspiring precursor, in terms of both genre and gender issues.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob, the protagonist, and Athos, his Greek rescuer and mentor, immediately understand the attractive power

of the ravines, where they plunge in pursuit of their geological, archaeological and naturalistic treasures:

> Like Athens, Toronto is an active port. It's a city of derelict warehouses […] It's a city of ravines. Remnants of wilderness have been left behind. Through these great sunken gardens you can traverse the city beneath the streets, look up to the floating neighbourhoods, houses built in the treetops.
> It's a city of valleys spanned by bridges. A railway runs through backyards. […] In April, the thickly treed streets are flooded with samara, a green tide. Forgotten rivers, abandoned quarries, the remains of an Iroquois fortress. Public parks hazy with subtropical memory, a city built in the bowl of a prehistoric lake. (89)

Soon after recording their first impressions of the city of Toronto on their arrival as post-war immigrants, they descend into the ravines:

> Like diving birds, Athos and I plunged one hundred and fifty million years into the dark deciduous silence of the ravines. Behind the billboard next to Tamblyn's Drugstore we dipped down into the humid amphitheatre of a Mesozoic swamp, where massive fronds and ferns tall as houses waved in a spore-dense haze. Beneath a parking lot, behind a school; from racket, fumes, and traffic, we dove into the city's sunken rooms of green sunlight. Then, like andartes, resurfaced half a city away. (98)

Their weekly pilgrimage to the ravines are attempts at capturing the ancient geomorphic soul of Toronto, its green essence, its geological and historical truth:

> I read about Toronto's dried-up, rerouted rivers – now barely gutter streams – that once were abundant tributaries fished by torchlight. […] Before the city, Athos cried – showman, barker – there was a forest of conifer and hardwood, huge ancient stands inhabited by giant beavers as big as bears. […] Late Sunday afternoons, we climbed from the lake bottom, covered with prehistor-

> ic ooze, to surface under a billboard on St. Claire Avenue. […] Muddy, clinging with burrs of enchanter's nightshade (stowaways on trouser legs and sleeves), we headed home for a hot dinner. These weekly explorations into the ravines were escapes to ideal landscapes; lakes and primeval forests so long gone they could never be taken away from us. (101-2)

Before the city of concrete and cement, buildings and sky-scrapers, tarred roads and bridges, Toronto was mainly covered with forests, lakes and rivers: it was a proper (wild) garden in itself. To Athos, the famous archaeologist, and to Jacob, the Jew who had buried himself among the leaves in a wood in order to escape from Nazi soldiers, resurfacing from the ravines to the modern city is like coming out of their own past, or humanity's past, as it were.

However, modern Toronto has turned its back on water, as Barry Callaghan, the Canadian writer of Irish origin, complains in one of his prose pieces:

> The city was criss-crossed from the very beginning by rivers or more accurately, creeks, and as the city grew, those creeks were not preserved, they were buried. They were buried twenty feet down in pipes, and they were turned into sewage systems, […] and all this feeds sewage into the lake and no one has a sense of rivers being there at all. (106)

Not only has Toronto renounced its sources of clean water but it has turned them into a polluting sewage system which also contributes to the pollution of Lake Ontario. The two rivers that run East and West to the city are no longer live with fish, Natives' trade, swimmers or excursionists. Similarly, in Anne Michaels's novel, Jacob observes: "Salmon were speared and scooped from the quick vein; nets were dipped into live currents of silver" (101). Now, Toronto waters are hidden away and silent.

Not so its ravines, lush with vegetation and pre-historic fascination, according to Callaghan:

> There are ravines. So the break in the flatness is a break down. Great green scars move in jagged patterns all through the city. […] Those ravines are lush, dull of greenery, and very silent places and real escapes into a kind of wooded territory, and they run right through the centre of the city. […] There is a downward buffer, a great secret place of great secret potential in the city, a subconscious reality that is sitting there, waiting to be tapped. (108)

Callaghan's definition of the ravines as the subconscious side of the modern city is such a powerful image that it perfectly illustrates the literariness of the ravines as the setting of many a Torontonian novel.

Margaret Atwood typically twisted her narratives so as to make her female protagonists find themselves down in the scary ravines, like newborn Alices in Wonderland, as a sort of initiation or rite of passage to maturity, knowledge, empowerment, self-awareness. In *The Edible Woman* (1969), Marian is taken by Duncan, her new boy-friend, down into an unknown ravine, which looks like Dante's infernal funnel. Here, with this new Virgil, or like Alice, Marian experiences fear of falling, and at the same time she has an epiphany which enables her to see Duncan as a replica of her ex-fiancé and enables her to resurface from the ravine with renewed self-confidence and autonomy. Besides, in *Lady Oracle* (1976), a mother warns her daughter about probable bad encounters in the ravine she has to cross to attend a special school. As in the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the bad encounter is inevitable. Yet, it is not some pervert who frightens Joan – a man, in fact, offers her daffodils – but her best friends, who tie her up to the bridge and leave her there, until a stranger finds her and helps her to reach home. Exactly as happens to Alice in Wonderland, here too, in this ravine, "everything turns upside down", the friends

become foes and the male strangers are innocuous and supportive.[1] Similarly, in *Cat's Eye* (1988) Elaine is cheated by her friend Cordelia, who forces her to go down the ravine and soon leaves her all alone to the frightening experience of being blocked in the muddy water of a creek that is believed to come straight down from the cemetery. Again, a sort of epiphany or vision saves her. She believes she has seen the Virgin of the Seven Sorrows guiding her up to the surface. Thus, it seems that to Atwood ravines are gothic sites, where cruelties and violence are experienced as an inevitable stage in women's lives. As an outcome, ravines are the places where resolutions are taken and the vision of one's liberation becomes possible.

These imagined adventures are rooted in Margaret Atwood's errands as a 9-year-old child, when she used to live close to the ravines:

> After living in the north part of the city, in 1948 the Atwoods moved to a house in the Leaside district of Toronto, near the southern end of Bayview Avenue. […] Just a short walk behind the house, at the end of Heath Street, was a footbridge. There Margaret could climb down through dense underbrush into the Moore Park Ravine, which snaked through the east side of the city. If she followed the creek, which eventually hooked into the main trunk of the Don Valley (the expressway was not yet built), she'd reach the Don Valley Brickworks, and the Todmorden Mills, built in1827. (Sullivan 1998, 43)

This is the St. Clair Avenue Bridge, east of Mount Pleasant Road, and it is the same district, St Claire Avenue West, where

[1] See Letizia Adduci, " 'Where is Here?' *Here* Is down the Ravine, Baby. A Brief Study of the Landscape Theme in Margaret Atwood", *English Studies 2007*, Torino, Trauben, 2008, pp. 5-23. See also Robert Fulford's column about Toronto & Margaret Atwood (*The National Post***,** August 24, 2000).
Available at http://www.robertfulford.com/Ravines.html**.** Accessed on July 10 2012.

Anne Michaels's protagonists live and from where they easily descend into the ravines.

In contrast, in *The Blind Assassin* (2000), the ravine is no place for survival, and here the ravine shows all its fatal attraction:

> Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge. The bridge was being repaired: she went right through the Danger sign. The car fell a hundred feet into the ravine, smashing through the treetops feathery with new leaves, then burst into flames and rolled down into the shallow creek at the bottom. Chunks of the bridge fell on top of it. Nothing much was left of her, but charred smithereens. (1)

The highest viaducts in Toronto are real sites for suicides often covered by the local news, and the ravines also really shape Toronto's literary imagery. However, the image of the fall carries another literary echo. In Michael Ondaatje's *In The Skin of a Lion* (1987), entitled "The Bridge", exactly like Atwood's suicidal chapter, a nun takes her frightening flight off the Bloor Street Viaduct:

> Look!
> Walking on the bridge were five nuns.
> Past the Dominion Steel castings wind attacked the body directly. The nuns were walking past the first group of workers at the fire. The bus, Harris thought, must have dropped them off near Castle Frank and the nuns had, with some confusion at that hour, walked the wrong way in the darkness.
> […] They saw the fire and the men. A few tried to wave them back. […] Some of the men grabbed and enclosed them, pulling leather straps over their shoulders, but two were still loose. Harris and Pomphrey at the far end looked on helplessly as one nun was lifted up and flung against the compressors. She stood up shakily and then the wind jerked her sideways, scraping her along the concrete and right off the edge of the bridge. She disappeared into the night […]. The worst, the incredible, had happened. A

> nun had fallen off the Prince Edward Viaduct before it was even finished. […]
> The man in mid-air under the central arch saw the shape fall towards him, in that second knowing his rope would not hold them both. He reached to catch the figure while his other hand grabbed the metal pipe edge above him to lessen the sudden jerk on the rope. The new weight ripped the arm that held the pipe out of its socket and he screamed […] he found himself a moment later holding the figure against him dearly. (31-2)

Differently from Margaret Atwood's vision of the ravines as sites of sadistic drives, with Michael Ondaatje the ravine becomes a site of miraculous survival. Above all, it is a site of tremendous poetic imagery, where the imagination can freely fly to the most incredible and tender of rescues. After all, the bridge – such a constitutive architectural feature arching over Toronto ravines – is a dream in itself, and in this specific case it represents the Modernist urban dream *par excellence*. Although here the viaduct is seen from above, as the continuation of the tarred and concrete city of the surface, and nature is not the protagonist of this incredible adventure that turns a simple immigrant Macedonian worker, in fact a dare-devil, almost into a super-hero, but Michael Ondaatje anticipates the romantic and stylistically lyrical visions of Anne Michaels. Indeed, her male protagonists, Polish refugees from the Second World War, escape from reality into the geology and natural history of the ravines, to forget their personal past, their loved ones, the horrors of war in Europe. They plunge themselves into pre-history, in order to escape History.

Anne Michaels's *The Winter Vault* follows this poetic note; in this novel nature assumes a central role as a heritage to be saved, salvaged and rescued. Jean, the protagonist of the novel, is an orphan who knows all the plants by heart, their names, qualities, shapes and properties. Her obsessive compulsion as an adult forces her to go back to the sites of dried-up beds of rivers and canals to

uproot all the little plants which used to proliferate with water and are now doomed to disappear, in order to transplant them:

> I'm keeping a record, she said bitterly. I'm going to transplant these particular plants, this particular generation. Though of course they'll never grow and reproduce themselves exactly as they would have, if they'd been left alone. (50)

This is what Jean explains to Avery, a British engineer and her future husband working on the dams, on their first encounter, before introducing him to her parents' apartment in Toronto. Here

> the living room floor, covered entirely with plants, glowed, the light glinting off the edges of hundreds of jars filled with seedlings and flowers.
> - Here are some good examples of indigenous species, said Jean. (53)

Jean has inherited the passion for gardening from her mother, she tends her garden in Montreal after her death, and is still doing so in this substitute little in-house botanical garden, as if her mother might come back and appreciate the improvements. Gardening has become a vocation, a way of mourning. Thus, when Jean has to move to Toronto to attend University, after her father's death and after selling the house in Montreal, she tells Avery:

> I took cuttings and seeds from every plant in my mother's garden, but there's no place for them. Now her whole garden is in pots and jars on my living room floor. […] I think of the last gardens on the river, I mourn them… (61)

This obsession with plants is a substitute for Jean's love for her mother; it becomes a silent homage, together with the study of Botany:

> but gradually it became something more, a passion, and I wanted to know everything: who had made the first gardens, how plants had been depicted in history, growing up in the cracks of cultures, in paintings and symbols, how seeds had travelled – crossing oceans in the cuffs of trousers …
> I think we each have only one or two philosophical or political ideas in our life, one or two organizing principles during our whole life, and all the rest falls from there… (62)

Here Jean explicitly claims to follow a precise philosophy, not so much eco-criticism but a new eco-philia: her love for plants becomes her philosophy of life and her policy of engagement and commitment to salvage species in danger of extinction, particularly the plants that used to be watered by rivers now dried-up because of the building of dams.

As a matter of fact, the novel is more about rivers, rapids, falls and dams; and, above all, about War. Moreover, Jean's deep sadness for the loss of houses, lands, peoples, even cemeteries, tombs and churches flooded-in by artificial lakes, creates a delicate and poetic lament throughout the novel which mounts to a powerful criticism against dams that seems to echo the much more politicized critical works of the Indian writer Arundhati Roy, among others. In her essay, or pamphlet, *The Greater Common Good* (1999), the Indian activist openly and courageously criticizes the huge projects of building a series of dams along the Narmada river, which means flooding vast fertile areas, inhabited by the so-called Tribals. They are communities of aboriginals, outcasts, who derive their whole sustenance from water, fish and wild plants, and they are now forced to move away, and are even persecuted by the police and by the Federal Government, who consider them terrorists or Maoists, as they are also called. This political dispute over water and forests also raises the question of who owns water, who has the right to use it and why minorities should be chased away from their original and sacred grounds, to make room for modern intensive and exhaustive agriculture, or even

worse, for multinational mining companies. The cogent issues raised by Arundhati Roy are not dissimilar from the protests and negotiations between the Canadian Federal Government and First Nations People which accompanied the building of the two big power plants in Quebec, La Grande One and La Grande Two. Jean compares the forced removals of people in Ontario, caused by the dams along the Saint Lawrence, to the forced removals of people in Egypt, at Abu Simbel, where even the pyramids had to be moved uphill in order not to be flooded and lost for ever.

Before Avery and Jean move to Egypt to work at Abu Simbel, Jean transfers all the little pots and jars to Avery's mother's place and transplants them into a little garden of her own, as if once more to re-create her own mother's garden. Later on, after losing her baby, moving back to Canada and separating from Avery in order to try to recover from the grief of that loss, she takes her decision: she makes a plan, particularly when she becomes aware of the presence of migrants in the city of Toronto, as she sees a couple sleeping on the grass of a park:

> Very early the following morning, she returned to the spot and planted, quickly, a trespasser, in the existing beds, cuttings that would grow unnoticed except for their fragrance. If she had known their homeland, she could have planted with precision, flowers that would have reminded them of Greece, Lithuania, Ukraine, Italy, Sardinia, Malta … so that if they came back there to sleep on the grass, familiar scents would invade their dreams and give them an inexplicable ease. But she had not heard them speak and so had no idea from where they had come. So she planted wild sorrel, which grows in every temperate country, and which is both edible and medicinal. (196)

From this moment on Jean's new determination to plant non-local species for the immigrants seems in tune with the philosophy inspiring the so-called "guerrilla gardening" movement. The movement originally started in New York, and now it is wide-

spread. In New York a group of people guided by Liz Christy and called Green Guerrilla started to re-generate a desolate spot of private land, turning it into a garden in the area of Bowery Huston. Nowadays the place is still tended by volunteers, but it has also gained the protection of the State Department. Similar groups share this philosophy of political gardening, of non-violent environmental activism, with the purpose of embellishing, improving and recuperating desolate, abandoned or neglected green spaces, particularly in urban areas or in urban peripheries. In spite of their eco-friendly and pacifist principles, these groups often use the same language that is used in warfare. For instance, they speak of "seed bombs". These are little balls of clay which have seeds inside them. They can be thrown on a certain spot of land and there the humidity of the soil should help the seeds to take roots and flourish. Their actions, be they collective or individual, are called "attacks" and are performed at night or in the early hours of the morning. They can affect both public and private spaces.

In Anne Michaels's *The Winter Vault*, Jean acts in the same way, although her actions are rather romantic, silent and delicate gestures of desperation, carried out in absolute anonymity:

> At first, Jean planted in the ravines, then in laneways, along the edges of parking lots, places without obvious ownership, overlooked for years. Then, she grew bolder, planting at night in the selvage between curbs and pavement, between pavement and front lawns; rims, crevices, along civic fencing.
> She kept track in a notebook and sometimes returned to investigate the progress of her work. […]
> Jean kneeled. She felt the damp soil of the small city park staining her legs. […] She parted the soil with her trowel, and one by one, drew rough round bulbs from her bag and slipped them down after the metal blade. She worked steadily, her hands found their way. She felt her fingernails fill with earth. From a distance, her

> trowel, a flashlight tied to it, was a firefly bobbing erratically a few inches above the ground. […]
> - What are you doing?
> Jean jumped.
> - Do I have to be afraid of you? The man said, pointing to her glowing towel. Are you a madwoman? Don't you know it is public property?
> - I'm … planting, she said.
> The man took in this information.
> - *Scilla Siberica*, said Jean, less firmly.
> - Don't you know this is a public property? He said again. (196-98)

With this character, this damaged woman, bereaved of her mother, and who has lost her baby girl, Anne Michaels leaves the ravines behind, as a green spectacle to be admired and studied for its geological, morphological and pre-historic value, and moves towards a new philosophy of nature: a more self-conscious participation in the regeneration of green areas, in the salvaging of endangered vegetal species, an active commitment to the preservation of bio-diversity.

Indeed, Jean seems to follow the teachings of one of the pioneer women writers of Canada: Catharine Parr Traill (1802-99), the sister of the famous writer Susanna Moodie (1803-85). Traill published a book on *Canadian Wild Flowers* (1868), which appeared with colour plates hand-produced by her artist niece Agnes Moodie Fitzgibbon. "In her preface to *Wild Flowers*, Traill expressed the hope that the book […] would teach the newly united Canadians to recognize and love their native plants. […] her text is littered with encouragements to transfer wildflowers into the more ordered environment of the garden or the greenhouse." Traill, however, identifies the wild flowers doomed to extinction to the Canadian Natives, thus acknowledging that they are "more native in Canada than she, the immigrant from England." As demonstrated above, Anne Michaels reverses this idea turning both plants and European immigrants into transplanted Canadi-

ans or Torontonians (Irmsher 2004, 101-103). After all, this is the philosophy of another pioneer "orticulturalist", Delos White Beadle (1823-1905), who believes that living in Canada is hard work, and flowers, like new immigrants, won't last long if they are not sturdy enough (105).

In spite of her academic knowledge in botany and biology, Jean seems unaware of the risk that transplanting might involve to local species, which might soon be outnumbered, or somehow endangered. This presumed ignorance seems justified, however, by a conscious refusal of any ideology concerned with "purity". It is Marina, Avery's Polish mother, who instructs Jean about such theories, applied even to botany:

> This will interest you, said Marina. I read in the newspaper that there's a movement in Germany to expel the rhododendron and the forsythia, to rip them out of every public and private garden, because they are not indigenous and are therefore a threat to 'pure German soil.' […]
> During the war, there were strict 'landscape rules,' enforced in all the occupied territories, especially in Poland. Not only were 'foreigners' to be expelled – including the Poles themselves – but also the soil had to be similarly purified. To this end, a botanical purge was ordered against the tiny forest flower *Impatiens parviflora* – and that's the meaning of the little flower you see hidden somewhere in every one of my paintings. (91; 93)

This declaration of resistance (to the botanical purge) through hospitality (within a painting) is later also practised by Jean, who introduces new foreign plants into Toronto parks and who also hosts in her life this foreign man, Lucjan. Similarly, in the novel she hosts his narrative, about the destruction of the Ghetto in Warsaw and its sorrowful reconstruction when the Russians took over.

Thus, Jean's gardening, as a gesture, moves firmly from private to public spaces, which become sites of ethnic difference and vegetal diversity. After planting her little in-house garden with her

mother's favourite flowers, she starts insinuating "foreign" and "migrant" plants in public gardens, for the sake, and with the complicity, of immigrants. This explicit association symbolizes Toronto as a hospitable urban environment to both European refugees and to non-local vegetal species: both can take root and survive in this new environment. In the end, the novel turns out to be much more about migration, adaptation and assimilation than anything else: people and communities, rivers and waters, monuments and cities, plants and animals, everything seems doomed to migrate, change and morph elsewhere. Moreover, no matter how traumatic or sorrowful those uprootings had been, the transplantation and cross-pollination seem to bring some relief and, above all, hope for the future. This particular trope, this connection between biological and cultural forms of diversity underlines North American literary transnational shift, according to Ursula Heise (390). Yet, for Michaels, vegetal diversity should help the migrants to feel at home rather than feeling compelled to adapt to a totally new and foreign environment. In a way, as Jean took bits of her mother with her, she wants to provide the migrants with bits of their vegetal motherlands. Vegetal diversity and enrichment parallel the increased multiculturalism in Toronto. Heise is quite critical towards this attitude, for she claims that it is based on the "questionable assumption that social systems are indeed in some way homologous to ecological ones" (395), while Michaels seems to embrace this equation romantically.

A similar shift from the ravines as sites of violence to a new idea of committed, almost religious gardening is presented in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*. In this dystopian urban setting ("the derelict city" 3), sects and gangs are organised as gated communities and are controlled by obscure corporative powers, sometimes similar to mafias or to paramilitary forces known as CorpSeCorps. In the middle of this paranoid "state", if the term is still tenable, a group of young people, God's Gardeners, tries, with religious zest, to survive autonomously by going

back to cultivation and gardening, while they are all waiting for a Waterless Flood to hit the planet. God's Gardeners preach a return to nature after years of urban devastation: "The abandoned towers in the distance are like the coral of an ancient reef – bleached and colourless, devoid of life." (3)

They seem to re-interpret the teachings of Saint Francis, thus restoring a religion of nature, or even a natural religion that is deeply rooted in the environment: "Birds chirp; sparrows, they must be. […] Unlike some of the other Gardeners – the more wild-eyed or possibly overdosed ones – she [Toby] has never been under the illusion that she can converse with birds." (3) Besides, an explicit reference to Saint Francis appears later on in the novel: "Saint Francis of Assisi preached a sermon to the Fish, not realizing that the Fish commune directly with God. Still, the Saint was affirming the respect due to them. How prophetic does this appear, now that the world's Oceans are being laid waste!" (196)

Even clearer, Atwood's God's Gardeners follow a strict routine according to the Benedictines' motto *Ora et labora*. Almost every chapter of the novel starts with the celebration of a Saint, with a sermon to the believers held by Adam One, the leader, and ends with a hymn sung by the whole community and meant as a teaching to the children and for the future generations. Then the community is set free to start working laboriously in the gardens and at the maintenance of this almost secret society, each one with a precise task, but all aiming at the well-being of the entire community. Their environmental philosophy and eco-philia is aimed at creating God's Garden on earth, as if inspired by Francis Bacon's idea of garden as the purest of human pleasures.[2]

God's Gardeners are like monks, and among their Vigils and Retreats, they tend their gardens, orchards and beehives piously, singing their solemn hymns to celebrate Nature and Mother

[2] See *The Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral of Francis Bacon*, A.S. Gaye (ed.), Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1927, pp. 139-145.

Earth in a pre-apocalyptic era of de-urbanization. Furthermore, if Atwood claims in her acknowledgements that "The Year of the Flood is fiction, but the general tendencies and many of the details in it are alarmingly close to fact," and that "the Gardeners themselves are not modelled on any extant religion, though some of their theology and practices are not without precedent" (433), we must think that such experiments are actually carried out in the Himalayas, for instance, by Buddhist monks, within small communities and with the help of Ongs, practising small-scale in-house gardening, production of chickens and eggs, recycling and composting, to support themselves and sell or exchange products to obtain other primary goods.

Thus, Atwood's novel might well be introduced by a photo published by Michael Ondaatje on his Literary Magazine, *Brick*, which foregrounds the back of a van on the streets of Florida. The rear of the van is painted with two opposing palm-trees at the sides, and luxuriant bushes, flowers and tall grasses at the base, all overlooking the sea and a rocky islet, and with the following green advertisement on top: "Jesus Landscaping. Bringing gardens back to life. Cell…..".[3] That is exactly the task that God's Gardeners have given themselves, as Adam One explains:

> Dear Friends, dear Fellow Creatures, dear Fellow Mammals:
> On Creation Day five years ago, this Edencliff Rooftop Garden of ours was a sizzling wasteland, hemmed in by festering city slums and dens of wickedness; but now it has blossomed as the rose.
> By covering such barren rooftops with greenery we are doing our small part in the redemption of God's Creation from the decay and sterility that lies around us, and feeding ourselves with unpolluted food into the bargain. Some would term our efforts futile, but if all were to follow our example, what a change would be wrought on our beloved Planet. (11)

[3] Available at *Brick Magazine*: http://www.brickmag.com/galleries/photos-michael-ondaatje/miami-gardener-photo-michael-ondaatje. (Accessed on 12 July 2012).

This evangelical address is a very early statement in the novel and provides the direction of the whole narrative, which hints at sustainable and organic agriculture, a return to very primitive and natural ways of cultivating the land, by turning urban spaces into viable, unpolluted gardens, and even more radically providing prescriptions of vegetarianism, for in order to join the Gardeners, disciples needs to take the Vegivows. Mother Earth and Nature become the new goddesses not to be worshipped, but nourished and nurtured. Planting and tending vegetable gardens and orchards become the icons of this new environmental battle. Not by chance, it is worth mentioning that two recent popular films for children, *WALL-E* and *LORAX*, deal with the one last little tree that has miraculously survived extinction, and which needs to be transplanted back on the Earth in order to repopulate it with greenery.

In contrast to Anne Michaels's romantic vision of a lonely woman salvaging the vegetal world, or witnessing the inevitability of dams all over the world, Margaret Atwood has a more comprehensive preoccupation about the environment, that involves all aspects of human life and all the natural ecosystems. What the two writers have in common, however, is the belief that no environmentalist can ignore scientific knowledge in biology, botany, chemistry and geology. Jean in Anne Michaels's novel is a scientist, and so are God's Gardeners with their school where they teach a whole set of disciplines about Nature. To Atwood environmentalism is not synonymous with improvisation or naïf sympathetic feelings towards Nature.

In order to memorize botany the Gardeners make drawings, a bit like Jean in Anne Michaels's novel who draws and classifies the plants and the places where she has transplanted them. Yet, they destroy whatever they write so that their opposing gangs and authorities can neither track them down, nor use any evidence against them. In the end, they are persecuted and dispersed, their garden is destroyed and they are accused of eco-terrorism. Some

members of this secret society survive in a kind of Noah's Ark named Ararat, or end up collaborating with more radical eco-activists and even get killed in public demonstrations. Others try to resist both individually, like Toby, the beekeeper, by practising the Gardeners' teachings in clandestine forms of endurance, or helping one another, like Ren, the I-narrator, and Amanda, two young girls who survive thanks to solidarity. In the end, they will all meet again, and, as happens in biology, this little cell grows a bit larger and strives to become a new "cell" of God's Gardeners. Therefore, it seems that both Margaret Atwood and Anne Michaels have turned to a self-aware philosophical praxis where nature and culture are no longer opposites, showing that only a Cult(ure) of Nature and committed activism (gardening?) can save our planet and its natural resources from a future of predictable catastrophe and exhaustion.

If Margaret Atwood's interpretation of environmental commitment and resistance – involving total devotion – makes her one of our contemporary paladins of eco-criticism, her novel can also be connected with a cluster of similarly radical novels, such as, first of all, Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) on communal life and children's rooftop gardens in dystopian London, Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1999) which denounces the treatment of bovine meats with oestrogens causing premature puberty, and a whole carnivorous culture that fixes stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and *All Over Creation* (2003), where hybridism creates a continuum between human biology and the natural world. Finally, J.M. Coetzee's philosophical essay *Life of Animals* (2001), is a reasoning against the violence in the meat industry and in favour of veganism, among other things.

Atwood's Gardeners not only grow their organic vegetables on rooftops and in other parts of buildings, but they practice a philosophy that negates consumerism at large, wearing simple clothes made of natural fibres and tissues, using only natural self-made drugs and refusing hospitalization, selling their produce,

not buying goods and gadgets: they consider themselves ethical, even though few of them are still tempted by materialism and fall prey to individualism and profit.

Among the many themes discussed in the novel, from sustainability to alternative energy systems, from natural healings to dietary prescriptions, from euthanasia to epidemics, one central position seems to be entrusted to the Beekeeper. Toby is a young girl who has been saved by the Gardeners from hard work in a burger bar and from sexual abuse. Her joining the Gardeners is more an act of gratitude than her own choice, and more than once she questions her status among the believers and her role. Since she is the first character we meet in the novel, and since she stands as a sceptical and critical voice among the Gardeners from whom she takes her distance now and then, her role as beekeeper is probably of high importance. On her arrival in the Garden of Eden (Edencliff Rooftop Garden), Toby is symbolically offered "berries" and then "a pot of honey was produced as if it was the Holy Grail." (43) This welcome banquet seems to stress how honey can fortify people and this is the meaning that honey acquires in the Bible (*Book of Judges* 14:14), where Samson, who has killed a lion, later on finds the lion's carcass full of bees and honey. He eats this honey and also gives it to his relatives. This provides him with strength which is not only physical but also spiritual. His famous riddle gives an account of his second encounter with the lion: "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness".

Adam One chooses Toby to teach the children Holistic Healing and how to prepare herbal lotions and creams. Later, she is befriended by Pilar, a kind woman at peace with the world, who teaches her all about bees, of which she is the keeper. Her main beliefs and attitudes involve speaking out loud to the bees, according to that Franciscan method Toby was so sceptical about. She believes the bees must be informed of everything. Thus, Toby is introduced to the swarm as a friend and even manages to

extract honey easily. Pilar also passes on some folklore about bees to Toby: "A bee in the house means a visit from a stranger, and if you kill the bee, the visit will not be a good one. If the beekeeper dies, the bees must be told, or they will swarm and fly away. Honey helps an open wound. […] All the bees of a hive are one bee: that's why they'll die for the hive. 'Like the Gardeners'." (99)

Here, the bees as a social system are openly compared to the Gardeners. The laboriousness and sense of duty of the bees, as well as their perfect – although rigid – social structure, obedience and sacrifice towards the Queen, has always been appreciated as a moral teaching and as an example for humanity. Thus, the importance of the bees in this narrative seems crucial. Like the bees, the Gardeners all work and contribute to the wellbeing of the community ("Much hard work still lies before us" 11), also to the point of defending that system with their life.

Actually the idyllic description provided by Virgil about the bees' social system in Book IV of *Georgics* is strikingly similar, or better, it could fit as the description of the Gardeners' organization: "They alone have children in common, hold the dwellings of their city jointly, and pass their lives under the majesty of law. They alone know a fatherland and fixed home, and in summer, mindful of the winter to come, spend toilsome days and garner their gains into a common store."[4]

Similarly, the Gardeners keep and raise their children all together, and all of them are submitted to the laws of what Toby at first defines as their "wacky religion": "everyone, including children, had to contribute to the life of the community." (69) They also produce and store away their natural products. They share and defend their house and their quarters. As happens with bees, the Gardeners have their hierarchy, too: "the Adams and Eves ranked higher, though their numbers indicated their areas of ex-

[4] Virgil, *Georgics* [149], Book IV. Translated by H.R. Fairclough. E-text available at http://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilGeorgics2.html#4 (accessed 18 July 2012).

pertise rather than their order of importance. In many ways it was like a monastery, she [Toby] thought. The inner chapter, then the lay brothers. And the lay sisters, of course. Except that chastity was not expected." (45)

Moreover, Toby gains a new self by following Pilar in her activities, caring for the bees and the crops connected to the bees, gathering and storing honey, preparing remedies with honey and roses for the natural-products market. One day, Toby breaks the news to the bees that Pilar has died, she takes over her position as beekeeper and becomes Eve number Six. This job, almost a moral duty, reconciles Toby with the Gardeners, their routine, their philosophy or religion. Toby is the one who survives the flood counting only on her intelligence and capacity of endurance: "She ought to trust that she's here for a reason – to bear witness, to transmit a message, to salvage at least something from the general wreck." (95) What gives her a bit of strength in the solitude of her watches in the post-apocalyptic period is a last jar of honey: "To cheer herself up, she opens her jar of honey. […] She's been saving it all these years as if it's a protective charm. Honey doesn't decay, said Pilar, as long as you keep water out of it: that's why the ancients called it the food of immortality." (96)

The importance given to bees and beekeeping in the novel is the clearest example of a kinship between man and nature, and this seems to be the message Atwood most keenly aims at conveying, while, on the other hand, she condemns exploitation and predatory attitudes towards Nature. In spite of the imminent apocalypse, the waterless flood of the title with its pandemic and rioting, blackouts and total devastation, this novel is not yet post-human. Even though genetic modifications and advanced plastic surgery are applied to human beings, they do not lose their humane attitudes. And this is precisely Toby's characteristic. The novel, which is a sequel to Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), still lays great responsibility on humankind as repository of knowledge about Nature and the Earth. If applied in a correct

and ethical way, such knowledge can save the environment and can prolong our species at least for a while. This is the path followed by Toby, from scepticism to active participation and adoption of the Gardeners' instructions, which will help her to survive and save her life. The presence of a rifle, besides this new "bible", makes Toby a potential guerrilla fighter/gardener. This philosophy of cooperation with nature is best portrayed by the battle the Gardeners have to face against three emissaries from the external world. In this occasion, Toby has to set her bees free, so that they can attack, sting and chase away the intruders: "The bees poured out, whining with anger, and went for him like arrows. He fled howling down the fire-escape stairs, flailing and slapping, trailing a plume of bees" (255), exactly as happens in the Bible, where bees are portrayed as exemplary armies, ready to fight and chase the enemy. Actually, Virgil too, sings the praise of the warrior bees, who faithfully follow their king to battle:

> But, if haply for battle they have gone forth – for strife with terrible turmoil has often fallen on two kings; and straightway you may presage from afar the fury of the crowd, and how their hearts thrill with war; for the warlike ring of the hoarse clarion stirs the loiterers, and a sound is heard that is like broken trumpet blasts. Then, all afire, they flock together: their wings flash, they sharpen their stings with their beaks and make ready their arms. Round their king, and even by his royal tent, they swarm in throngs, and with loud cries challenge the foe.[5]

A last interesting note in the text is that Nature is not seen as far away and well separated from the urban and productive world. In contrast, the proper wilderness and the sea are two separate settings in the novel. Nature becomes part of the urban setting, or what remains of it, not only in the form of public parks, but

[5] Virgil, *Georgics* [67], Book IV. Translated by H.R. Fairclough. E-text available at http://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilGeorgics2.html#4 (accessed 18 July 2012).

also within domestic spaces: rooftops for vegetable gardens and orchards, cellars for the cultivation of mushrooms. In-house, hand-made gardens seem thus to be the futuristic answer to the garden cities of the Victorian era, as they were imagined, drawn and realized by Ebenezer Howard.

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